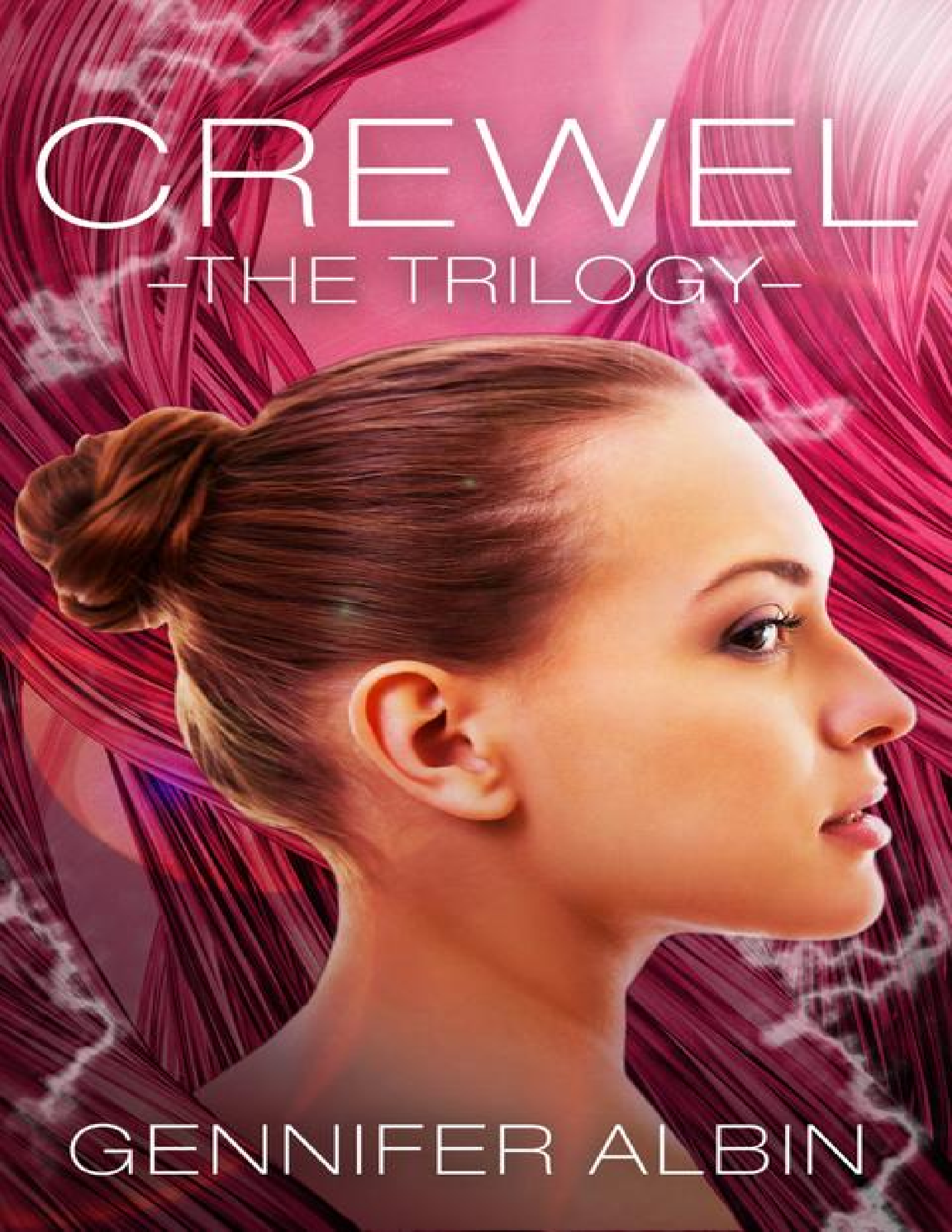
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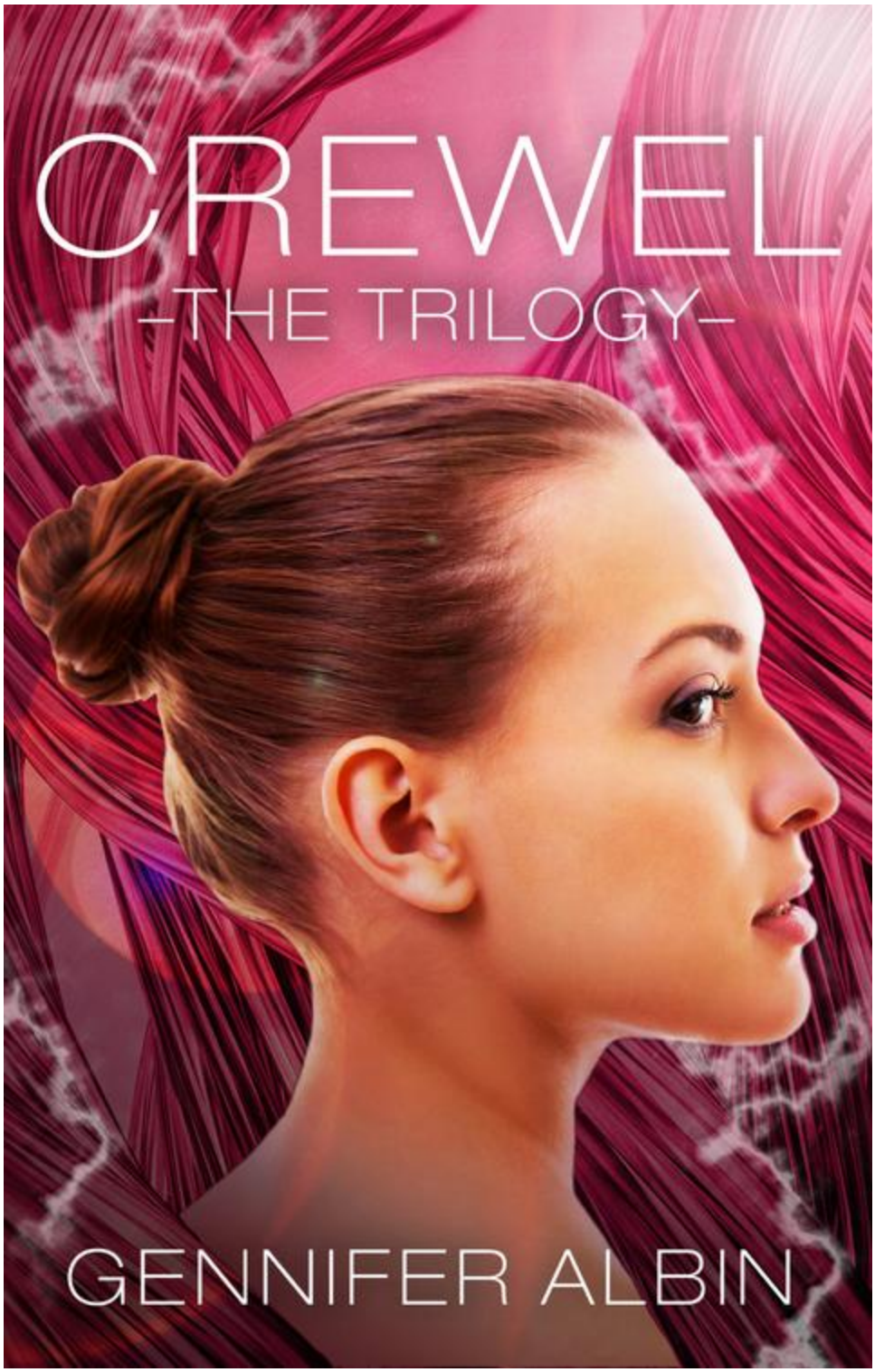
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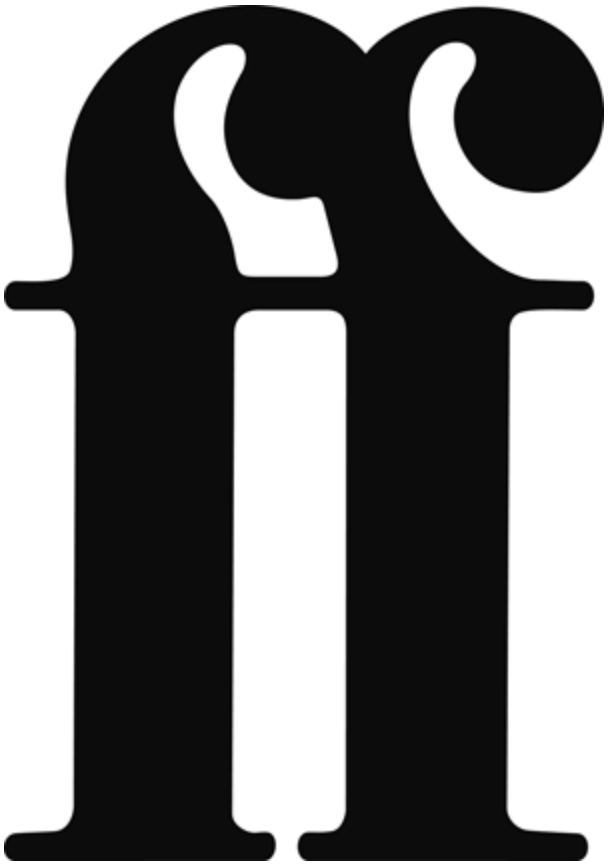

GENNIFER ALBIN

FABER & FABER

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CREWEL
A NOVEL

PROLOGUE

THEY CAME IN THE NIGHT. Once, families fought them, neighbors coming to their aid. But now that peace has been established, and the looms proven, girls pray to be retrieved. They still come at night, but now it's to avoid the masses with eager hands. It's a blessing to touch a Spinster as she passes. That's what they tell us.

No one knows why some girls have the gift. There are theories, of course. That it's passed down genetically. Or that girls with an open mind can see the weave of life around them at all times. Even that it's a gift only given to the pure-hearted. But I know better. It's a curse.

I've trained at night with my parents ever since they realized I had the calling. They taught me clumsiness, making me fumble until it looked natural when I dropped a bowl or spilled the water jug. Then we practiced with time, my parents encouraging me to take the silky strands deftly into my fingers to twist and tangle them until they were warped and useless in my hands. This was harder than dropping and spilling. My fingers wanted to weave the delicate tendrils seamlessly with matter. By my sixteenth birthday, when it was time for the required testing, the ruse was so effective, the other girls whispered I would be sent away early.

Incapable.

Awkward.

Artless.

Maybe it was their taunts lodging in my back like tiny daggers that poisoned my resolve. Or perhaps it was the way the practice loom sang out, begging to be touched. But today, the last day of testing, I finally slipped—my fingers gracefully winding through the ebbing bands of time.

Tonight they'll come for me.

ONE

I CAN COUNT THE DAYS UNTIL SUMMER draws to a close and autumn seeps into the leaves, painting them ginger and scarlet. Right now, though, the dappled light of mid-afternoon is glorious emerald, and it's hot on my face. With sun soaking into me, everything is possible. When it is inevitably gone—the seasons programmed to begin and end with smooth precision—life will take its predetermined route. Like a machine. Like me.

It's quiet outside my sister's academy. I'm the only one waiting for the girls to be released. When I first began my testing cycle, Amie held her pinkie finger up and made me swear to meet her each day after I got out. It was a hard promise to make, knowing they could call me anytime and sweep me away to the Coventry's towers. But I make it, even today. A girl has to have something constant, has to know what to expect. The last bit of chocolate in the monthly rations; the tidy ending to a program on the Stream. I want my little sister to be able to count on a sweet life, even if the heat of summer tastes bitter now.

A bell tolls and girls pour out in a surge of plaid, their giggles and shouts breaking the perfect stillness of the scene. Amie, who's always had more friends than me, bounces out, surrounded by a handful of other girls in the awkward stages of early adolescence. I wave to her and she dashes toward me, catching my hand and pulling me in the direction of our house. Something about her eager greeting every afternoon makes it okay that I don't have many companions my age.

"Did you do it?" she asks in a breathless voice, skipping ahead of me.

I hesitate for a moment. If anyone will be happy about my mistake, it will be Amie. If I tell her the truth, she'll squeal and clap. She'll hug me, and maybe for a moment I can leach her happiness, fill myself up with it, and believe everything is going to turn out fine.

"No," I lie, and her face falls.

"It's okay," she says with a resolved nod. "At least this way you get to stay in Romen. With me."

I'd rather pretend she's right, to allow myself to get lost in the twelve-year-old's gossip, than face what's coming. I have my whole life to be a Spinster, and only one more night to be her sister. I ooh and aah at the right times, and she believes I'm listening. I imagine that the attention builds her up and completes her, so that when I'm gone she'll have enough not to waste her life searching for it.

Amie's primary academy lets out at the same time as the metro's day shift, so Mom is waiting when we get home. She's in the kitchen and her head snaps up as we enter, her eyes rushing to meet mine. Taking a deep breath, I shake my head, and her shoulders slump in relief. I let her hug me as long as she wants, her embrace flooding me with love. That's why I don't tell them the truth. I want love—not excitement or worry—to be the lingering imprint they leave on me.

Mom reaches up and brushes a strand of hair from my face, but she doesn't smile. Although she thinks I failed at testing, she also knows my time here is almost up. She's thinking that I'll be assigned a role soon, and married shortly thereafter, even if I won't be taken away. What's the point of telling her she'll lose me tonight? It's not important now, and this moment is what matters.

*

It's an ordinary evening at our ordinary table, and apart from the overcooked pot roast—Mom's specialty and a rare treat—not much is different, not for my family at least. The grandfather clock ticks in our hall, cicadas perform their summer crescendo, a motopact rumbles down the street, and outside the sky fades into dusky twilight beckoning nightfall. It's a day just like the hundreds that came before it, but tonight I won't tiptoe from my bed to my parents' room. The end of testing also means the end of years of training.

I live with my family in a tiny bungalow outside Romen's metro where my parents have been assigned two children and an appropriately sized house. My mom told me they applied for another child when I was eight—before they discovered my condition—but upon evaluation they were denied. The cost to maintain each individual makes it necessary for the Guild to regulate population. She explained this matter-of-factly one

morning as she pinned her hair up into elaborate curls before work. I had asked her for a brother. She waited until I was older to explain that it would have been impossible anyway, due to segregation, but I was still mortified. Pushing my rations around my plate, I realize how much easier it would be if I had been a boy, or if my sister was a boy. I bet my parents wanted boys, too. Then they wouldn't have to worry about us being taken away.

"Adelice," my mother says quietly, "you aren't eating. Testing is over. I would think you'd have an appetite."

She's very good at projecting a calm demeanor, but I sometimes wonder if the carefully painted cosmetics layered until her face is silken with rouged cheeks and plump lips are a ruse to help her stay balanced. She makes it look effortless—the cosmetics, her perfectly pinned scarlet hair, and her secretary suit. She appears to be exactly what is expected of a woman: beautiful, groomed, obedient. I never knew there was another side to her until I was eleven, the year she and my father began training my fingers toward uselessness.

"I'm fine." My response is flat and unbelievable, and I wish I had a perfectly painted face to hide under. Girls are expected to remain pure and natural—in body and appearance—until they're officially released from testing. Purity standards ensure that girls with weaving abilities don't lose them by being promiscuous. Some of my classmates look as beautiful in this state as my mother—delicate and fair. I'm *too* pale. My skin is washed out against my strawberry hair. If only it was the brilliant fiery red of my mother's or soft gold like my sister, Amie's, but mine is as dull as dirty pennies.

"Your mother made a special dinner," my dad points out. His voice is kind, but the implication is clear: I'm wasting food. Staring at the potatoes and too-dry slices of roast beef, I feel guilty. This meal probably ate up two night's rations, and then there's the cake.

It's a large frosted cake from a bakery. My mom has made us small cakes for our birthdays, but nothing like this fancy white cake with sugar flowers and lacy lines of frosting. I know it cost half a week's rations. Most likely they'll resort to eating it for breakfast later in the week while they wait for their next disbursement. The frail white scallops edging the cake make my stomach turn. I'm not used to sweets, and I'm not hungry.

As it is, I can barely bring myself to eat a few bites of the overcooked meat.

“This is exactly the cake I want for my birthday,” Amie gushes. She’s never had anything like a bakery cake before. When Amie came home from academy today and saw this one, my mom told her she could have one for her next birthday. It’s a pretty big deal for a kid who’s only had hand-me-downs her whole life, but my mom obviously wants to soften her transition into training.

“It will have to be a bit smaller,” Mom reminds her, “and you won’t be having any of this one if you don’t eat your dinner first.”

I can’t help smiling as Amie’s eyes widen and she begins scooping food into her mouth, gulping it down hard. Mom calls her “an eater.” I wish I could eat like her when I’m excited or tense or sad, but nerves kill my appetite, and the fact that this is the last dinner I’ll ever share with my family has my stomach in knots.

“Did you get this for Adelice?” Amie asks between bites, revealing bits of chewed food.

“Close your mouth when you eat,” my dad says, but I see the corner of his own curling up a bit.

“Yes, Adelice deserved something special today.” My mother’s voice is quiet, but as she speaks her face glows and a faint smile plays at her lips. “I thought we should celebrate.”

“Marfa Crossix’s sister came home from testing last week crying and hasn’t left her room yet,” Amie continues after swallowing the meat. “Marfa said it was like someone died. Everyone is so sad. Her parents are already setting up courtship appointments to cheer her up. She has an appointment with pretty much every boy with an active marriage profile in Romen.”

Amie laughs, but the rest of the table falls silent. I’m studying the scallops in the icing, trying to make out the delicate pattern the baker used. Amie doesn’t notice the quiet resistance of my parents to the Guild-approved curriculum and marriage laws, but they haven’t exactly been honest with her either. I’m old enough to understand why they don’t want me to become a Spinster, even if they’ve always been careful with what they say to me.

My father clears his throat and looks at my mother for support. “Some girls really want to go to the Coventry. Marfa’s sister must be disappointed.”

“I would be, too,” Amie chirps, shoveling a forkful of potatoes into her mouth. “They showed us pictures at academy. Spinsters are so beautiful, and they have everything.”

“I suppose,” Mom murmurs, slicing small bites of meat with her knife in slow, precise strokes.

“I can’t wait for testing.” Amie sighs dreamily, and my mother frowns at her. Amie’s in too much of a daze to notice.

“Those girls are very privileged, but if Adelice was called, we would never see her again.” Mom’s response is careful. My parents have started trying to plant doubt in Amie’s head, although her tendency to rattle on to anyone listening makes it hard to talk to her about important stuff. But I don’t mind listening to Amie relate the dramas of every girl in her class or the programs she saw on the Stream. It’s my break before spending every night practicing and rehearsing what to say—and not to say. Curling up with my sister before she falls asleep is when I get my only sense of normal.

But a cake can’t buy more than a night’s happiness. My parents will have a long road ahead of them preparing Amie to fail at her testing. She’s never shown an ounce of weaving ability, but they’ll prepare her. I wonder if she’ll still be eager to go when it’s her turn in four years.

“Marfa says when she’s a Spinster she’ll always get her picture on the front of the *Bulletin* so her parents won’t worry. That’s what I’d do, too.” Her face is solemn as though she’s really thought this through.

Mom smiles but doesn’t respond. Amie fawns over the glitzy images in our daily bulletin like most pre-testing girls, but she doesn’t truly understand what Spinsters do. I mean, of course she understands that they maintain and embellish the fabric that makes up our world. Every girl learns that early in academy. But someday my parents will explain what Spinsters really do—that no matter how good their intentions, with absolute power comes corruption. And the Guild has absolute power over us and the Spinsters. But they also feed us and protect us. I listen to my parents, but I don’t really understand either. Can a life of providing food and safety for others be that bad? I only know that what’s about to

happen to me is going to break their hearts, and once I'm gone, I'll never have a chance to tell them I'm okay. I guess I'll have to get my picture on the front of the *Bulletin* like Marfa Crossix.

The meal continues in silence, and everyone's eyes gravitate toward our fluffy white centerpiece. The small oak dining table sits four perfectly; we can pass bowls and plates to one another, but tonight my mother served us because there's room for nothing but the cake. I envy the gleeful sparkle in Amie's eyes as she stares at it, probably imagining how it will taste or building her grand thirteenth birthday cake in her head. My parents, on the other hand, sit in quiet relief: the closest to celebrating they can muster.

"I'm sorry you failed, Ad," Amie says, looking up at me. Her eyes dart back to the cake, and I see the longing in them.

"Adelice didn't fail," my father tells her.

"But she wasn't chosen."

"We didn't want her to be chosen," my mother says.

"Did you want to be chosen, Ad?" Amie's question is so earnest and innocent.

I barely shake my head.

"But why not?" Amie asks.

"Do you want that life?" Mom asks her quietly.

"Why are you so against the Spinsters? I don't get why we're celebrating." Amie's eyes stay focused on the cake. She's never been so blunt before.

"We're not against the Spinsterhood," Mom responds in a rush.

"Or the Guild," Dad adds.

"Or the Guild," Mom echoes with a nod. "But if you pass testing, you can never return here."

Here—the cramped two-bedroom house in the girls' neighborhood, where I've been safe from the influence of boys my age. My home, with books stashed in hollowed cubbies behind panels in the walls, along with family heirlooms passed down for almost one hundred years from mother to daughter. I've always loved the radio in particular, even if it doesn't work anymore. Mom says that it used to play music and stories and proclaimed the news, like the Stream does now but without the visuals. I

asked once why we kept it if it was useless, and she told me that remembering the past is never useless.

“But a Spinster’s life is exciting,” Amie argues. “They have parties and beautiful dresses. Spinsters have control.”

Her last word hangs in the air, and my parents exchange a worried glance. Control? No one granting permission to have children. No predetermined cosmetic routines. No chosen roles. That would be true control.

“If you think they have control—” Mom begins quietly, but my father coughs.

“They have cake,” Amie says with a sigh, slumping against the table.

Dad takes one look at her pitiful face, throws his head back, and laughs. A moment later, my usually stoic mother joins in. Even I feel some giggles bubbling up my throat. Amie does her best to look sad, but her frown twitches until it turns into an impish grin.

“Your cosmetic tokens should arrive next week, Adelice,” my mom says, turning back to me. “I’ll show you how to apply everything.”

“Arras knows, I better be able to apply cosmetics. Isn’t that a girl’s most important job?” The jibe is out of my mouth before I consider what I’m saying. I have a habit of cracking a joke when I’m nervous. But judging from the look of warning on my mom’s face, I’m not being very funny.

“And I’ll jump right on those courtship appointments,” Dad says with a wink, breaking up the tension between Mom and me.

This actually makes me laugh, despite the numbing dread creeping through my limbs. My parents aren’t as eager to get me married and out of the house as most girls’ families are, even if I am required to be married by eighteen. But the joke can’t elevate my mood for long. Right now the thought of getting married, an inevitability that was always too surreal to consider, is out of the question. Spinsters don’t marry.

“And I get to help you choose your cosmetic colors at the co-op, right?” Amie reminds me. She’s been studying catalogs and style sets since she could read. Mom doesn’t take us to the metro co-op to shop often, because it’s not segregated, and when she has it’s been for home supplies, not something exciting like cosmetics.

“I hear they’re increasing the number of teachers in the Corps on assignment day,” Dad continues, serious again.

I’ve always wanted to be a teacher. Secretary, nurse, factory worker—none of the other designated female roles left any room for creativity. Even in a carefully controlled academy curriculum there is more room for expression in teaching than there is in typing notes for businessmen.

“Oh, Ad, you’d be a great teacher,” Amie bursts in. “Whatever you do, don’t get stuck in an office. We just finished our shorthand class, and it was so boring. Besides you have to food-gen coffee all day! Right, Mom?”

Amie looks to her for confirmation, and Mom gives her a quick nod. My sister’s too oblivious to see the pain flash across her face, but I’m not.

“I do make a lot of coffee,” Mom says.

My throat is raw from holding back tears, and if I speak …

“I’m sure you’ll get assigned to be a teacher,” Mom says, eager to change the subject, and then she pats my arm. I must look nervous. I try to imagine what I would be feeling now if assignment day was only a week away for me, but I can’t. I was supposed to go to testing for a month, to be dismissed, and then get assigned. It was the first time I’d been on a loom, one of the large automated machines that show us the fabric of Arras. It was the first time any of us Eligibles had even seen a loom. I only had to act as if I couldn’t see the weave, like the other girls, and answer the proctor’s questions with my practiced lies. If I hadn’t slipped, I would have been dismissed, and then assigned based on my strength assessments at academy. For years, I’d dutifully learned shorthand, home ec, and information storage. But now I’d never get the chance to use any of it.

“We need a new teacher.” Amie interrupts my thoughts. “Mrs. Swander left.”

“Is she expecting a baby?” my mother asks in a knowing way. Her eyes dull a bit as she speaks.

“No.” Amie shakes her head. “Principal Diffet said she had an accident.”

“An accident?” Dad repeats with a frown.

“Yep.” Amie nods, suddenly wide-eyed. “I’ve never known anyone who’s had an accident before.” Her voice is a mix of awe and solemnity. None of us know anyone who has had an accident, because accidents don’t happen in Arras.

“Did Principal Diffet say what happened?” Mom asks so softly that I barely hear her in the quiet dining room.

“No, but he told us not to worry because accidents are very rare and the Guild will be especially careful and investigate and stuff. Is she okay?” she asks, her voice conveying implicit trust. Whatever my father replies, she’ll believe it. I long to fall back in time and feel the comfort of knowing my parents have every answer, knowing I am safe.

My father forces a tight-lipped smile and nods at her. Mom’s eyes meet mine.

“Do you think it’s odd?” She leans into Dad, so Amie won’t hear. It doesn’t matter because Amie has returned to worshipping the cake.

“An accident? Of course.”

“No.” Mom shakes her head. “That the principal told them.”

“It must have been bad,” he whispers.

“Something Manipulation Services couldn’t cover up?”

“We haven’t heard anything at the station.”

“None of the girls said anything today.”

I wish I had some intelligence to share, because I’m feeling excluded. Outside the dining room night has engulfed our quiet street. I can see the shadowed outline of the oak tree in our yard but little else. It won’t be long now, and we’re wasting time worrying about Mrs. Swander’s accident.

“We should eat the cake!” The suggestion bursts from me. My mother, momentarily startled, does a quick inventory of our plates and agrees.

Dad cuts into the cake with an old bread knife, smearing frosting across the blade and blending the vibrant red flowers into dull pink globs. Amie props her body against the table, completely absorbed in the ceremony, while Mom collects the pieces from Dad and passes them around. I’m bringing the first bite to my mouth when Mom stops me.

“Adelice, may your path be blessed. We’re proud of you.” There’s a break in her voice, and I know how much this moment means to her. She’s waited my whole life for this night: my release from testing. I can

barely meet her eyes, and she motions for us to eat as she wipes a stray tear from her cheek, leaving a smudge of charcoal from her running mascara.

I take a bite and mash it against the roof of my mouth. The frosting is so sweet that it catches in my throat and makes my nose tingle. I have to wash it down with half a glass of water. Next to me Amie is devouring her piece, but my mother doesn't tell her to slow down. Now that I'm through testing, it's Amie's turn. Tomorrow my parents plan to begin preparing her for her own testing.

"Girls—" my mother begins, but I'll never know what she was going to say.

There's a hammering at the door and the sound of many, many boots on our porch. I drop my fork and feel the blood rush out of my face and pool in my feet, weighting me to my chair.

"Adelice," my father breathes, but he doesn't ask, because he already knows.

"There isn't time, Benn!" my mother shrieks, her perfectly applied foundation cracking, but just as quickly she regains control and grabs Amie's arm.

A low hum fills the air and suddenly a voice booms through the room: "Adelice Lewys has been called to serve the Guild of Twelve. Blessings on the Spinsters and Arras!"

Our neighbors will be outside soon; no one in Romen would willingly miss a retrieval. There's nowhere to escape. Everyone here knows me. I rise to my feet to open the door for the retrieval squad, but my father pushes me toward the stairs.

"Daddy!" There's fear in Amie's voice.

I grope forward and find her hand, squeezing it tight. I stumble down behind her as my father herds us to the basement. I have no idea what his plan is. The only thing down here is a dank, meagerly stocked root cellar. Mom rushes to the basement wall and a moment later she slides a stack of bricks out of place to reveal a narrow tunnel.

Amie and I stand and watch; her wide-eyed horror mirrors the paralyzing fear I feel. The scene before us shifts and blurs. I can't wrap my head around what they're doing even as I see it happening. The only constant—the one real thing in this moment—is Amie's fragile hand

clutching my own. I hold on to it for life, hers and mine. It anchors me, and when my mother wrenches her away, I shriek, sure I'll vanish into nothing.

"Ad," Amie cries, stretching out to me through Mom's arms.

It's her fear that spurs me back to this moment, and I call out to her, "It's okay, Ames. Go with Mommy."

My mother's hands falter for a moment when I say this. I can't remember when I last called her Mommy. I've been too old and too busy for as long as I can remember. Tears that have been building up wash down her face, and she drops her hold on Amie. My sister jumps into my arms, and I inhale the scent of her soap-clean hair, aware of how fast her small heart beats against my belly. Mom circles us and I soak up the strength of her warm arms. But it's over too quickly, and with a kiss on my forehead, they're gone.

"Adelice, here!" My father shoves me toward another hole as Amie and Mom disappear into the passage, but before I enter he grabs my wrist and presses cold metal near my vein. A second later heat sears the tender skin. When he releases my arm, I draw the spot up to my mouth, trying to blow off the burning.

"What …" I search his face for a reason for the techprint, and looking back down, I see the pale shape of a flowing hourglass marking the spot. It's barely visible on my fair skin.

"I should have done it a long time ago, but …" He shakes off the emotion creeping into his voice and sets his jaw. "It will help you remember who you are. You have to leave now, honey."

I look into the tunnel that stretches into nothing. "Where does it go?" I can't keep the panic out of my voice. There's nowhere to hide in Arras, and this is treason.

Above us a stampede of heavy boots breaks across the wooden floor.

"Go," he pleads.

They're in the dining room.

"There's food on the table! They can't be far."

"Search the rest of the house and cordon off the street."

The feet are in the kitchen now.

"Dad …" I throw my arms around him, unsure if he will follow me or go into another tunnel.

“I knew we could never hide how special you are,” he murmurs against my hair. The basement door bangs open.

But before I can say I’m sorry for failing them, or tell him I love him, the boots are on the stairs. I scramble into the hole. He restacks the bricks behind me, shutting out the light. My chest constricts in the darkness. And then he stops. A large crack of light still streams in to the tunnel from the basement. I can’t move.

The bricks crash onto the concrete floor and light floods back into the tunnel. Choking down the scream fighting to loose itself, I struggle forward in the dirt, away from the growing light. I must keep moving forward. I try to forget Dad, and Mom and Amie in the other tunnel, as I crawl through the cold soil.

Keep moving forward.

I repeat it over and over, afraid that if I stop I will be paralyzed again. But somehow I do keep moving forward, farther and farther into darkness, until cold steel clamps down on my leg. I scream as it digs into my skin and begins drawing me back—back to the light and the men in boots, back to the Guild. I tear against the packed dirt of the tunnel, but the claw is stronger and each desperate lunge I make back toward the darkness drives the metal deeper into my calf.

There is no fighting them.

TWO

AS THEY PULL ME FROM THE ESCAPE TUNNEL, someone jabs a needle in my wounded leg. I thrash as the liquid burns through my calf, but suddenly I'm calm. When one of the officers helps me stand in the damp basement, I smile at him. I can't remember being happier.

"Patch that up," barks a tall official coming down the basement stairs. He's not like the others, who are dressed in typical soldier regalia. He is older and very handsome. His jaw is too smoothly sculpted to be natural, but the slight gray peppering his styled hair gives away his age. His nose, eyes, and teeth are too perfect, and I bet he's been taking advantage of renewal patches. He has the kind of face they put on the Stream to read the news. I blink dreamily at him as a medic begins cleaning the wound from the claw. A group of women scurry down behind the official and begin wiping my face and combing my hair. It feels so nice I want to fall asleep. The only thing keeping me awake is the cold, gritty concrete under my bare feet. I've lost my shoes in the struggle.

"You gave her too much," the official grumbles. "I said get her Stream-ready, not dose her out of her mind."

"I'm sorry. She was really fighting us," one of the officers tells him. I can hear the grin in his voice.

"Fix it."

A moment later another needle pricks my arm, and I stop smiling. I'm still calm, but the euphoria is fading.

"Adelice Lewys?" the official asks, and I nod. "Do you understand what's going on?"

I try to say yes but nothing comes out, so I bob my head once more.

"There's a Stream crew upstairs and most of your neighborhood. I'd prefer we didn't have to drag you off looking like a loose thread, but if you try that again I'll have him dose you. Do you understand what I'm saying?" He points to the medic who has finished healing my wound.

I manage to squeak, "Yes."

“Good girl. We’ll deal with this later,” he says, gesturing to the escape tunnel. “Your job is to smile and look thrilled to be selected. Can you do that?”

I stare at him.

The official sighs and cocks his head to activate the microscopic complant embedded over his left ear. The device automatically connects you to any other complant user or wall-communication panel. I’ve seen men in the metro chatting on them, but my father’s role as a mechanic doesn’t warrant the privilege of having one implanted. A moment later I’m privy to the man’s one-sided conversation.

“Hannox, do you have them? No, hold her.” Turning back to me, he points to the hole my mother and Amie disappeared through. “Let’s pretend my colleague has someone you love very much in his custody, and your performance for the Stream crew decides whether she lives or dies. Can you look thrilled now?”

I muster up the brightest smile I can and flash it at him.

“Not bad, Adelice.” But then he frowns and pushes away the grooming crew. “Are you idiots? This is a retrieval. She can’t wear cosmetics!”

I look away as he continues to berate the aestheticians, and search for signs of my father. He’s nowhere, but as my eyes scan the wall I can’t make out any other cracks that could hide a passage. Of course, until twenty minutes ago I hadn’t known about even the first two passages.

“Are we clear?” the official asks the medic.

“Give her one more minute.”

“I’m fine,” I say with a smile, practicing for the Stream crew. But as soon as I speak, my stomach contracts hard and sends my dinner back up my throat. I double over and retch up pot roast and frothy cream.

“Fantastic,” the official bellows. “Can’t I even get a competent squad?”

“She’ll be fine now,” the medic says, backing up a few steps.

The official glowers at him and then turns and leads me to the stairs. At the last step, he grabs my arm and leans in close. “Make it look real. Her life depends on it.”

I don’t have the guts to ask him if he means my mother or my sister; his answer will only tell me who is dead. I stagger up the stairs and blink

hard against the bright lights of the main floor. Every lamp is on and the kitchen and dining room have been ransacked. As we march through the dining room on our way to the front door, I slip on something dark and sticky. One of the officers catches my arm as I stumble, and I snap my head down to the spot on the floor. It's nearly black and pools out from a large, stiff bag.

I crumble back against the man behind me.

"No time for that now, sweetheart," he hisses. "You've got a show to put on or we're going to need more of those bags."

I can't tear my eyes from the bag, so he leads me away. I try to tell him there's blood on my feet, but he's already barking more orders at his squad.

"Halt," commands a guard at the door.

The official steps forward, runs his eyes over me, sighs, and steps out onto the porch to thunderous applause. I turn away and focus on the long black bag, but a guard moves over to the table, blocking my view. I glance over to see he's eating the cake.

"Hey," I call, and everyone looks at me in surprise. "That's half a week's rations! Leave it for my family."

The officer's eyes dart to his companion, and I see it on their faces—pity—but he sets down the cake.

"Blessings, Romen! I'm Cormac Patton and …" The rude official addresses the crowd from my porch. More applause. He waits a moment for it to calm down.

"He always has time for applause," an aesthetician notes dryly.

"Blessings, Arras. I'm Cormac Patton," her companion mimics him in a low voice, and they laugh until a guard shushes them.

Cormac Patton. Coventry Ambassador for the Guild of Twelve and the Stream's number one pretty boy. How could I have not recognized him? They must have really drugged me. Or maybe I'm not used to celebrities hanging out in my basement. Even my mom has a thing for him. But I don't see the appeal. Sure, he's perpetually clad in a black, double-breasted tuxedo, and very handsome, but he has to be at least forty. Or maybe even older, since I can't remember a time in my life when he looked anything but forty.

I can't comprehend that he's standing on my porch right now.

“We are privileged to call to service Adelice Lewys,” Cormac’s voice bellows. An officer pushes me out next to him. “May Arras flourish at her touch.”

The crowd echoes back the blessing and color floods my cheeks. I paste the bright smile on my face and will it to stick.

“Wave,” Cormac instructs me through gritted teeth, his own smile undiminished as he gives the command.

I wave shyly and keep beaming at the crowd. A moment later, officers surround and flank us, escorting us to a waiting motocarriage. The crowd swarms into a mob and all I see are hands. The officers hold most of them back, and I shrink away from the mob. Everywhere I look, fingers claw at me, grabbing for a bit of my skirt or a caress of my hair. I’m breathing faster, and beside me Cormac frowns. The drugs must not be as strong as he thought. I think of his threat and force myself to look excited.

The motocarriage is longer than any of the motopacts I’ve seen in Romen. I’ve seen ones like this on the Stream. Motopacts are daily cars to drive into the metro, but motocarriages like this have chauffeurs. I fix my eyes on it; I only have to make it that far and then this public charade will be over. An officer ushers me to the rear side door and helps me in. As the door shuts me safely away from the cheering crowd, I scowl.

“That’s much more attractive,” Cormac mutters as he slides in next to me. “At least you’re the last retrieval.”

“Had a long day?” I ask harshly.

“No, but I can’t imagine dragging your deadweight around much longer,” he snaps back as he pours himself a glass of amber liquid. He doesn’t bother to offer me any.

I lapse into silence. Deadweight. The image of the body bag lying casually on my dining room floor floats into my head and hot tears prick my eyes, threatening to spill over.

I stare out the window so he won’t see me cry. The glass is tinted and the crowd can no longer watch us, but they’re still milling around. Neighbors talk animatedly, pointing to our house. Several heads incline, relaying the news to people far away on their complants. We haven’t had a retrieval in Romen in ten years. Tomorrow I’ll be on Romen’s morning Stream. I wonder what they’ll say about my parents. My sister.

Cormac is downing the last drops of his cocktail when his head cocks to the side to take a call. “Here,” he grunts. He’s quiet but soon disinterest turns to mild annoyance.

“Clean it,” he says. “No, clean all of it.”

His head shifts back down, disconnecting from the call, and he looks at me. “Lucky girl.”

I shrug, not willing to betray my feelings at the moment. I’m not sure what cleaning is, and from the way he growled the order, I’m not sure I want to know.

“Oh, you have no idea,” he says. “How’s your leg?”

I glance down to the gashes the claw left and find they’re gone.

“Fine, I guess.” I try to keep the surprise out of my voice but can’t.

“Renewal patch,” he informs me. “One of the many perks you’ll have as a Spinster.”

I don’t respond, and he returns to the crystal bottle for another drink. My eyes wander back to the window. We’re nearly out of Romen, and it’s hard to believe I’ll never come back here. The view grows hazy and my eyelids droop; the drugs they administered earlier are making me sleepy. But right before my eyes close, the street disappears behind us, shimmering and fading into nothing.

*

An officer shakes me awake when we get to Nilus Station and hands me a pair of shoes. Another escorts me to the toilet and stands guard. Afterward, I’m taken to a small private powder room and given a simple white shift to change into. They take away everything I was wearing before. I dress as slowly as possible, trying to sift through the fog in my head.

I can’t put off going out into the station for long. Nilus Station is situated in the capital of the Western Sector and it rebounds travelers to the other three capital cities in Arras. It’s also strictly policed. Only the most important businessmen can travel between the four sectors; someone like my dad wouldn’t qualify. I’ve never been out of Romen’s city limits before today. I should be excited, but all I feel is a dull twinge

at the thought. Cormac is lounging in a turquoise chair outside the powder room.

“Ever been to a rebound station, Adelice?” Cormac asks conversationally as he stands to greet me when I step back into the station lobby.

I shake my head. I’m not eager to act like we’re friends.

“Didn’t think so. It’s pretty rare these days for some citizens to get border passes.” He smiles, and for the first time I notice a crease in his flawless skin. By “some citizens” he means women and service workers.

Cormac sets the pace, and I stroll with him along the periphery of the station. There’s a small booth offering shoe shines, a coat-check stand, and a little café. He gestures for me to follow him into the restaurant, and we’re led up to the second-floor mezzanine by a waiter. From here we can watch the travelers waiting for their rebound appointments in the great marble hall. Even though it’s busy, the sounds of travel—shoes clicking, complant conversations, rustling *Bulletins*—fill the space and bounce back across it. The roar of energy is nearly deafening.

“Miss, I’ll need to see your privilege card,” the waiter says, sneering at me.

I glance down at my simple dress and realize I don’t even have my citizen ID with me, but Cormac speaks before I can make excuses.

“She’s my guest. Do you need to see my PC?” It’s more a challenge than a question.

The waiter glances at him and the haughty smile evaporates. “Ambassador Patton, I apologize. I didn’t recognize you. I only saw the girl.”

Something about the way he says *the girl* makes me feel dirty.

“No need to apologize. You don’t get many girls in here, I imagine.” He laughs, and the waiter joins him.

“We weren’t informed there would be a retrieval squad traveling through, or we would have been prepared,” the young man assures him.

“It was a last-minute retrieval, so the usual call-aheads weren’t possible.”

“So she’s a …” He eyes me admiringly.

“She is an Eligible. Treat her as you would a Spinster.” There’s an edge of warning to Cormac’s voice, and the young man nods solemnly.

He waits on me hand and foot, although I'm not allowed to order for myself. And as if a hovering waiter isn't annoying enough, every man in the place stares at me. It's the shameless gaze of the patrons that provokes a startling realization. Glancing back at the bustling travelers, I see the outline of suits and fedoras. The only other woman in the station takes coats at the stand I noticed earlier. Apparently only men are allowed to eat here. I knew rebounding was reserved for important businessmen, but I never realized that even the station was segregated. I rub my hands on the hem of my shift, aware of how warm it is here.

"Lecherous lot," Cormac says, and chuckles. "Actually, you don't see many women out from behind the desk these days. Not without their husbands."

It takes a minute for me to realize he means me. I'm the woman out and about.

"I'd suggest eating. I know you can't have much left in you after that stupid medic screwed up. You would think they would know how much juice to give a 115-pound girl, and yet it's always too much or too little. You're lucky though—the Nilus Station has a great café." He tips his head back toward the kitchen door. "It might be a while before you eat again."

"I'm not very hungry," I say. My lamb chop sits untouched on the plate in front of me. Cormac's meal is similarly neglected, for all his advice to eat, but only because he's nursing a bourbon.

Cormac leans against the table and looks at me. "I figured as much. Take my advice, though, and eat something."

I think of the dining room table and white cake sitting on it, the puddle of black blood under its legs, and shake my head. The only thing I'm hungry for is answers.

"Eat, and I'll tell you what you want to know."

I take a couple of bites, knowing I won't be able to eat if he answers me first anyway, but as soon as I swallow, I turn my attention back to him. "Are they dead?" The words come out flat, and in that moment I know I've lost hope.

"Your father is," Cormac admits in a low voice. There's no remorse in his face. It's a fact.

I look down and take a deep breath. "And my mother and sister?"

“Your sister is in custody, but I have no news on your mother.”

“Then she got away?” I ask breathlessly, wondering how they managed to catch Amie. Despite the news about my father, I feel a tug of hope.

“She got away for now. You’ll be more upset later when the Valpron wears off.”

“Maybe I’m stronger than you think,” I challenge, although I’m all too aware of the numbness throughout my body.

“That would be a surprise. Valpron is a calming agent.” Cormac’s eyes narrow, and he sets down his fork. “What was your plan anyway?”

“Plan?”

“Don’t be stupid, Adelice,” he snarls. “They found four tunnels under your house that lead to places around your neighborhood. Where were you going to go?”

“I have no idea. I didn’t know about them.” It’s the truth. I’m not sure I could lie right now if I wanted to, but I’d never guessed exactly how far my parents were willing to go to keep me from the Guild. How long ago had they dug those four tunnels, and how had they gotten away with it? From the way Cormac is staring at me, I’m sure he believes I know more than I’m telling.

Cormac snorts, but resumes eating. Or rather, drinking. “Sure you didn’t. Just like you didn’t try to fail at the testing.”

My eyes snap up to his, and I wonder how much he knows about this, but I don’t say anything else.

“I’ve seen the surveillance Stream on your testing. The moment you wove was an accident,” he continues.

“I had no idea what I was doing,” I say, and in truth, I didn’t. I’d never used a loom to weave before and something about seeing the fabric of life—the very raw materials that composed the space around me—laid out before me, rattled me. We’d been measured and questioned, and had practiced basic tasks like weaving actual fabric, but none of my classmates had much success with it. It took a certain talent they didn’t seem to possess, and I’d spent my whole childhood learning to ignore mine.

“I doubt that,” Cormac says, setting down his glass. “I know it was an accident because the loom wasn’t on. A girl who can weave through time

without a loom is a rare thing. It takes a very special girl to do that. We almost retrieved you right there.”

I want to sink under the table. I knew I’d given myself away, but not how much I’d revealed. This is my fault.

“Fine. Don’t say anything. There’s no way your mother got out,” he tells me coldly. “We had to clean the area after the Stream crew left.”

“Clean?” I think back to the complant conversation I overheard in the motocarriage. It was short and he was mad, but the rest is lost in a haze. As I sift back further, the evening comes in bursts of images. Eating with my family. A white cake. Cold, dark dirt.

“I love how innocent you are. It’s really just … delightful.” He smirks, and this time I see tiny crinkles around his eyes. “The section has been cleaned and rewoven. No use trying to explain why a whole family went missing, especially not with the recent accident.”

“My sister’s teacher,” I murmur.

“Mrs. Swander,” he confirms. “What a mess, but not significant enough to justify a full cleaning.”

I try to wrap my mind around what he’s saying. The Guild transports food, assigns roles and houses, and oversees the addition of new babies to the population. But Arras hasn’t had an accident or crime in years. At least not that I know of. “Wait, are you saying you removed the memories of all the people in Romen?”

“Not exactly,” he says, downing the last of his bourbon. “We adjusted them a bit. When people try to remember your family, it will be a bit blurry. Your history now indicates you were an only child and your parents have been given clearance to move closer to the Coventry—that’s if anyone bothers to check up on you, but they won’t.”

“You made it all disappear,” I whisper.

“It’s easy to adjust at night thanks to the curfew,” he says, taking a bite of steak. “I’m sure it sounds horrible to you, but there’s no need to cause massive panic.”

“You mean”—I lean in and keep my voice low—“there’s no need to let people know you murdered their neighbors.”

The wicked grin fades from his face. “Someday you’ll understand, Adelice, that everything I do ensures people are safe. Cleaning a whole town isn’t something I take lightly, and it’s not easy. Most Spinsters don’t

have the talent for it. You'd be wise to remember you're the reason I had to order it."

"I thought Arras didn't have to worry about safety. Isn't that why you need girls like me?" I challenge, gripping the butter knife next to my plate.

"Like I said, your ignorance is truly delightful." But he doesn't seem amused anymore. Instead his black eyes blaze with repressed fury. "Spinsters do ensure safety, by following my orders. It's not all parties and loom work. The Guild demands loyalty. Never forget that."

I can hear the warning in his voice not to push this further, so I relax my hand and the knife clatters back to the table.

"I hope you had enough to eat," he snaps, rising from his seat. Apparently two bites of food is enough to appease him.

I follow. I don't have any other choice.

A girl from our neighborhood was labeled a deviant a few years back. It's a very rare thing, since everyone in Arras lives by zero-tolerance policy for misbehavior. But my dad told me that occasionally a child is brought up on charges and taken away. He said sometimes they come back, but most don't. The little girl came back, but she was always in a daze, never quite in the moment with the rest of us. That's how my neighbors will be when they think of me. It's as though I don't exist, and even the meds still coursing through my body can't block the tingle of pain that runs down to my fingertips when I think of it.

The meal was a courtesy it turns out, because we don't have rebound appointments. We don't need them. I'm torn between feeling guilty that he was being nice to me and wondering what his motives were. I trail Cormac as he strides past the line of men waiting on deck for their scheduled departures. A few grumble as we pass but the others shush them.

"I need to bump two spots," Cormac tells the man at the counter, flashing him his PC.

I have no doubt this man knows who he is, but he takes the card and studies it for a moment before keying in a code on the companel, a communications system built into the wall behind him. A moment later, a young woman dressed in a snug sky-blue suit steps out from the corridor behind the desk and leads us past the counter.

“Ambassador Patton, will you require a refreshment while you rebound?” She’s all bubbles and pink lipstick.

“I ate. Thank you,” he tells her with a wink.

She doesn’t ask me.

Cormac’s rebound compartment is before my own, and I half expect him to disappear through the door without another word to me, but he turns and sizes me up one last time. “Adelice, I suggest you get some rest during your rebound.”

I keep my eyes focused on the end of the corridor. He’s acting like my dad. Telling me when to eat, when to sleep. But he’s the reason I need a surrogate father in the first place.

“You know you don’t deserve the way they’re going to treat you.” His voice sounds concerned but the Valpron must be wearing off, because I can barely keep myself from spitting at him. I don’t need his kindness.

“You have no idea what you’re getting yourself into,” he says, reading my face. He sighs and opens the chamber door. “I hope you learn to listen before it’s too late.”

I don’t bother to respond. I don’t want his arrogant advice. I watch him fixedly until the door shuts behind him. My guide shepherds me to the next compartment and follows me in.

“This is the first time you’ve rebounded,” she says matter-of-factly as she ushers me to a single chair on a small platform in the center of the room. “You’re likely to experience some nausea or vomiting.”

I sit down awkwardly and take in the sparse room.

“Here.” She reaches around me and buckles a strap against my waist.

“What’s that for?”

“We need to keep your movement confined to a minimal space during the rebounding process. Usually you can read or eat or drink,” she tells me, unfolding a small tray from the arm of the chair. “But no getting up.”

I glance down at the straps and raise an eyebrow.

“I’m sorry.” She lifts her heavily lined eyes, and I can see she means it. “I’m not authorized to give you anything.”

“It’s okay,” I say with a shrug. “I get the impression girls are rare around here.”

The girl adjusts my straps and checks the buckle before she steps back. She hesitates and checks the countdown on the wall: I have two

minutes until the rebound will begin.

“That’s it though.” She pauses and glances around the room. “I probably should shut up.”

“What?” The medication is definitely wearing off, because now I’m holding back panic.

“Yes, women very rarely rebound, only Spinsters and Ministers’ wives. But they are given anything they want,” she whispers.

“I don’t understand,” I admit slowly.

She leans forward and pretends to adjust the tray. “They come in dressed up and we are supposed to give them bulletins and fashion catalogs to peruse. But you …”

I stare at her, trying to get what she’s telling me.

“My directions were to keep you buckled and locked down.”

“Locked down?”

“Yes.” She sighs and gives me a sympathetic pat. “I’m sorry.”

She reaches behind my back, and a second later, a large helmet woven of thick steel chains clamps down over my head. I cry out, but the sound is muffled. She squeezes my hand once, and I calm a little. Then more metal locks down, binding my wrists.

“Your rebound will only take an hour,” she reassures me, although I can barely hear her through the twisted metal. “Good luck, Adelice.”

I wish I’d asked her name.

The helmet blocks most of the room around me, but I can see through the gaps. It’s an inconsequential room with bare white walls, except for the clock counting down in the corner.

The nausea hits first. The floor drops from under me and my stomach turns over, but I don’t fall. The helmet keeps my head perfectly straight and my neck stretched, so I don’t throw up, but I want to. Closing my eyes, I breathe evenly, trying to keep the sickness at bay. When I open them and peer through the steel wires, the room around me is gone, and I’m surrounded by a shimmering array of lights. The sight calms me and I focus on studying the gleaming strands that comprise the rebound compartment. Glowing beams twist across the room and then long threads of gray knit up through them, criss-crossing over the light into a luminous fabric of gold and silver. Somewhere a girl sits, replacing the weave of the rebound chamber with that of a chamber in a coventry,

effectively moving me from one location to the other. I'm traveling hundreds of miles without moving a muscle. It's a delicate procedure, which is why it's reserved for the most important people in Arras. The Stream ran a special story vlip about the process a few years ago.

Gradually the light disappears and slowly—too slowly—gray walls form in patches around me, and the radiant canvas of the rebound process fades into a concrete room. It takes an eternity before the beams are gone, but when the last flickers into wall, I'm happy to feel the helmet being lifted from my head.

A group of solemnly clad officers surrounds me. The one who removed the helmet hesitates at the cuffs on my arms. They ache from being shackled during the trip, and I'm about to tell him so when a young blond in an expensive suit steps forward and holds his hand up. His head is cocked to the side, and I realize he's on his complant. Despite his obvious youth, he seems to be in charge. He's the kind of boy my classmates would zero in on in the daily *Bulletin* and giggle over as they passed his image around. But even this close to him, I only feel curiosity.

"Sedate her."

"Sir?" the officer asks in surprise.

"She wants her sedated," the blond boy orders. "You want to ask her why?"

The officer shakes his head, but as a medic rushes forward with a syringe I can see the apology in the boy's blindingly blue eyes.

THREE

WHEN I WAS EIGHT, the girl next door, Beth, found a bird's nest that had fallen on the line marking her yard from ours. I was not allowed to enter her yard, and she never came into mine. She applied that line to all of our interactions, keeping a firm boundary between us at home, at academy, and at the commons where we played with the rest of the neighborhood girls. Beth made sure the other girls didn't talk to me either, so I kept to myself. Her bullying made me timid in her presence—always drawing back instead of coming forward—so I watched as she batted the nest along the property marker with a stick. I didn't say anything until I saw the speckle of blue as it tumbled over.

"Stop." My command was so low she shouldn't have heard it, but our street was as quiet as usual, and her head perked up to stare at me, the stick frozen in place.

"What did you say?" she asked in a voice that wanted me to remember my place, not answer her.

Whatever that glimpse of blue had stirred in my chest, I grabbed onto it and pushed the demand out louder.

Beth edged closer to the line, but didn't cross it. Instead, she hoisted the nest on her stick and tossed it over to my yard. "There," she mocked. "Take your precious nest. It doesn't matter, the mama bird isn't coming back for it now. They don't want their eggs after someone else has touched them."

Hatred seethed inside me, but I stood on my side and watched her walk into her house without saying another word. She glanced at me just once as she opened her front door, and her eyes were full of scorn. I stared at the nest for a long time: two eggs peeked out of the grass next to it. I thought of myself and my sister when I looked at them: two sister sparrows. Gathering up some fallen leaves from our yard, I covered my bare hands before placing the eggs into their spots in the nest, and then lifted it back to the tree in our yard. But the small gesture did nothing to soothe the aching rage building in my chest.

As I watched the nest, growing increasingly frustrated with my inability to protect the tiny lives inside, the strands of the weave glimmered to life around me. The tree and the nest blurred like a delicate tapestry before my eyes, strands that called out to be touched, and I reached and slipped my fingers around them. Although I'd been aware of the fabric of life woven around us before, for the first time I noticed how bands of gold stretched across it horizontally, and how colored threads wove up through them to create the objects around me. As I watched, the golden strands of light flickered slightly, and I realized they were slowly moving forward, away from the moment in front of me. They weren't simply fibers in Arras's tapestry—they were lines of time. Tentatively, I reached for one of the golden fibers. Encouraged by its silky texture, I took it and yanked it hard, trying to force the time bands back to a moment when the mama bird was guarding her precious babies. But the strands resisted. No matter what I did, they kept on creeping forward. There was no going back.

The mama bird never returned. I checked on the little blue eggs every morning until one day my dad relieved me from my vigilance and the whole nest vanished. I didn't touch those eggs, but I guess the mama bird didn't know where to look; that's why she didn't come back.

*

There is only darkness. It is damp, and with the palms of my hands I can feel that the floor of my cell alternates between smooth and jagged, but one thing is constant: it is always cold. My parents' suspicions about the Guild were well-founded. I wonder if my mother knows where I am. I picture her circling our house, searching for me in her own empty nest.

If she's still alive. My heart flutters in response to some new emotion. It sits like a big lump in my throat as I remember the body bag leaking onto the floor. And now they have Amie. The idea that she's at their mercy claws at my stomach. Never in the years my parents were training me did I understand why they were doing it. They told me that they didn't want to lose me. My father spoke of the dangers of too much power, but in vague, noncommittal terms, and my mother always shushed him when he became too impassioned. The Guild gave us food and

perfectly controlled weather and health patches. I have to believe those people—the humane government of my memory—have Amie now. Whatever my crimes, those officials wouldn't hold her accountable. But I can't ignore how wrong I was about the Guild or my parents. And it's my fault she was taken. It was my hands that gave me away at testing. I run them along the rough cracks in the patches of stone until my fingertips are torn and bloody.

The facts are inescapable. I'd been taught to hide my gift by my parents. All I had to do was pretend for a month while I performed the Guild's testing and I would have been released from service. And if I hadn't been so selfish, so scared of disappointing my mom and dad on the night of my retrieval, none of this would have happened. But I'm not sure I know how things might be different now. Even if I had told them I'd slipped during testing, would we have escaped? Sifting through flashes of my childhood for clues, I remember my parents being strong, but isolated from the rest of our community. They genuinely loved each other. Dad would leave Mom little love notes around the house, which I found both revolting and oddly reassuring when I stumbled across one. He treated her with a respect that few of the other grown men I encountered in Romen showed women or girls. I'd believed this was why they didn't want me to become a Spinster, because it would tear our family apart—and our family was all we had. But beneath the happy veneer of our home, there were always secrets, particularly my training, which was kept from Amie. They told me she wouldn't understand, and the tone they used when they explained this was the same one they used when discussing my "condition" with each other.

In the dark, I can't hide from the only thing I can finally see. I didn't want to see the treason in their actions. I ignored the implication of their words and heard what I needed to hear to feel safe, not what they were actually telling me. And now I've lost my chance to know my parents. All I can do is fit together the pieces they left behind in my memory.

No one comes to visit me. There's no food and no water. And no light. This can't be how they treat the Spinsters. I must be being punished for my family's treason. I was taught about the coventries in academy and shown pictures of the formidable towered compounds, one of which I think I'm in now. But the walls and buttresses of those compounds

housed sumptuous rooms and art and plumbing. There's not even a toilet in this cell. I'm forced to go in the corner. The mustiness of the stone overpowers the smell at first, but even the muck of the cell can't control it forever and now the acrid odor of bile prickles my nostrils. In the dark, the smells are becoming more acute, burning my throat.

I lie on the floor and try to picture my location. I imagine there is a window in the room and light streams in from the sun. Cormac told me I was being taken to the Western Compound, which houses the largest Coventry of Spinsters in Arras and sits on the edge of the Endless Sea, so if I looked out I might see pine trees or maybe the ocean. Even though my hometown of Romen is only a few hours from the ocean, I've never traveled outside metro limits. The population of each metro is strictly regulated to ensure the local weave isn't damaged by excessive change to its structure. That's why the boundaries of each metro are carefully guarded—for our safety.

Each of the four sectors has these special compounds, built on the edge of the Endless Sea, that are responsible for keeping Arras functioning. In academy, we were permitted to study a very simple map that outlined the sectors and their capitals. Four perfect triangles of land, surrounded by an ocean that never ceases, and their coventries arranged in perfect symmetry like the points of a cross. But that's all we were shown. The Guild didn't want to tempt students to try to travel outside their hometowns. We were taught that if too many people traveled at a time, it could undermine the structural integrity of Arras. So all traveling arrangements had to be preapproved through proper channels or it wouldn't be safe, but Spinsters have special border privileges, making them almost as important as businessmen and politicians. It was the one thing that ever appealed to me about becoming a Spinster—being able to see the world—but the idea that I could never return home outweighed the travel perks.

And there're not many other perks to being a Spinster as it turns out. I can't force myself to pretend there is a window in the cell. Because there is no sun. No clock. No hum of insects. I have no idea how long I've been here. I'm starting to wonder if I'm dead. I decide to sleep and not wake up. If this is the afterlife, I should be free from dreams. But no such luck—nightmares continually interrupt my sleep. I lie here, eyes burning

in the dark, still trying to adjust, hopelessly, and my mind rages with the injustice.

And then the door opens and light streams in, blinding me, until my eyes begin to see the dark outlines of the tiny chamber.

“Adelice?”

Is that my name? I can’t remember.

“Adelice!” Less timid this time, but still a squeaky yap.

“Take her up to the clinic and rehydrate her. I want her in the salon in an hour.” The squeaky voice instructs someone I don’t care to see. The voiceless one crosses over to me, boots clicking against the stones, and lifts me casually over his shoulder.

“What a stink. Never thought something so foul could come out of such a tiny thing.” He laughs. Maybe later he can buy himself a drink to celebrate his cleverness. “At least you’re light.”

I consider reminding him that starving a person has an influence on her weight, but I don’t want to encourage his feeble sense of humor. And I’m too weak to think of something smart to defend myself.

“Are you even old enough to be chosen?”

I say nothing.

“I know they found you during testing,” he continues. I begin to count each of his tangled curls. They’re so dark they are almost black, but looking closer I realize his hair is actually brown. He’s not like metro men, who are polished and groomed and chiseled until their jawlines are angular and smooth without a trace of facial hair. Even my father scrubbed his nails and shaved each night. He smells of hops and sweat and work. He must do more physical labor than most men in Arras, because he carries me like I’m nothing, and I can feel how taut the muscles of his arms and chest are against my thin gown.

“Not much to say, huh,” he mocks. “Well, good. It’ll be a nice change not to have another overprivileged brat bossing us around. I wish they were all mute like you.”

“I suppose even a mute girl,” I snarl, “has more privileges than the scum that has to drag her stinky body upstairs.”

He drops me, and it’s a testament to how long I was imprisoned that being dropped on a hard stone floor doesn’t hurt. I’m so used to it that I sit and stare up at him. I’m surprised to find that my eyes have adjusted

enough to see the look of loathing on his face. He's as dirty as he smells, a coat of grime almost theatrically applied to his face and neck, but underneath it, he's striking. His cobalt-blue eyes, accented by the dirt, radiate out against the filth all over him and for a moment something stirs in my stomach, and I'm rendered speechless again.

"You can walk on your own. I was doing you a favor," he growls. "I thought maybe you were different. But don't worry, you'll fit right in with the rest of them."

I swallow hard and stumble up to my feet. I almost lose my balance, but I'm too proud to apologize or to ask for the strange boy's help. And I can't deny that now that I've really looked at him, I feel funny about letting him touch me again. Girls don't talk to boys back home, and they certainly don't let boys carry them. Most parents, like my own, bring their daughters into the metro rarely, to avoid any pre-dismissal contact with the opposite sex. But I'm guessing the electric pulse racing through me where his arms and hands held me up wasn't caused by the modesty the academy tried to instill in me for years. I find myself wanting to say something clever to him, but the words won't come, so I concentrate on trying to walk. Something that's definitely harder than it used to be.

"You can tattle on me when you've been processed. Maybe they'll rip me for mistreating a new Eligible." His tone is cruel, and I'm surprised at how much it stings. I've lumped him in with all my other captors, and now he's lumping me in with the Guild, too.

He walks briskly, and I can barely keep up. My feet prickle, shooting needles up my legs, but I follow behind him and eventually catch up. He glances down, obviously surprised to see me walking beside him.

"Probably dying to get your hands on some fancy cosmetics," he chides, and I'm tempted to call him scum again.

"The Spinsters have the best aestheticians," he continues. "It's one of the perks. All you poor, new Eligibles are so eager to get beautified. It must be such a burden to wait sixteen years to wear lipstick."

I hate being treated like I'm some stupid metro girl eager to paint her face, curl her hair, and step into the working world. I've seen pictures of the Spinsters made up until they look like molded plastic, but I'm not about to talk to him about it. He can think whatever he wants; he's a

nobody anyway. I repeat the words in my head—he's a nobody—but I can't seem to believe it myself.

"'Course you were in the cells," he continues, clearly not needing me to participate in this conversation, "which means you tried to run." Our eyes meet for the first time and the brilliant blue seems to warm a little. "Guess you have some fire in you, girl."

That does it. "Do you always call women a few years younger than you 'girl'?"

"Only ones that look like they're *girls*," he says, purposefully emphasizing the offending term.

"Oh, right. And what are you? Eighteen?" I point out. Did he think the dirt covered his age?

He taps his grimy forehead. "I'm older up here than most men twice my age."

I don't ask him why. I don't want to get too cozy with him. There's no point. We continue to walk, but his eyes stay locked on me. He must have passed this way many times before, because he doesn't need to look ahead to see where he's going.

"Let me carry you." He sounds resigned but there's a note of kindness to his offer.

"I'm fine," I insist too harshly, and I try to hide the blush that's creeping onto my neck at the thought of his arms around me again.

He grunts and stops staring at me. "So you ran?"

I keep my eyes on the door at the end of the stone hall.

"Let me guess, you think I'm going to tattle on you?" He grabs my arm to halt our progression, leaning in to keep his voice from echoing. "If you ran, it doesn't matter why. It doesn't matter if you admit it. They've marked you and they'll watch you. So take my advice and play dumb."

His eyes flicker like the tip of a flame, accentuating his warning, and I know he means it.

"Why do you even care?"

"Because they'll kill you," he says without hesitation. "And a girl with enough smarts to run is hard to come by these days."

"Then they could kill you for talking to me like this," I whisper, and it comes out as desperation, fear, everything I've been feeling in the cell. He seems to respond to the emotion in my voice, as though I'm putting

words to the unspoken tension in the air, and for just a moment, he leans down closer to me, and I wait for what he'll tell me next, with my breath caught in my throat.

He shrugs. "If you tell, and you won't."

I try to hide my disappointment, but he's right. I won't tell on him, but I'm not sure if it's because he said I was smart or if it's because I feel like we share a secret. Neither of us is what we appear to be.

He opens the door to reveal a sterile staircase with bright white walls that feel out of step with the old, musty cell block. My guide flourishes his arm, but as I cross the threshold, he whispers, so softly I barely hear: "Besides, there are worse things than death here."

*

The clucking disapproval of the Coventry cosmeticians is beginning to wear me out. The boy left me at the top of the steps, and a girl herded me to a shower. The water was painfully cold, reinforcing my belief that I'll never be warm again unless I start to play along. So here I sit, eyes cast down, quiet, completely malleable to their designs. It isn't bad. They've given me a downy white robe, and despite my fervent desire to hate this, the feeling of having my hair combed and shampooed is relaxing. Maybe I've just missed human contact.

A woman snips furiously at my hair, while another smooths cream over my face. They shape my eyebrows into trim arches and line them for emphasis. Then they spread a milky white paint across my face and set it with powder. I remember my mother carefully doing the same, explaining step-by-step what each item was, and stopping to tell me how few cosmetics I would need when my time came—how flawless my skin was. She would cringe to see them paint my face now, and I keep imagining she'll burst through the door and save me from the powders and rough pots of color and long pricking pens for my eyes.

"She's horribly gaunt," the scissor woman notes, now applying thick globs of gel with a brush to my still-wet hair.

"She was in the cells …?" Her companion's voice trails into a question. I look up to see the face I know she's making—the one that is suggestive and haughty—but instead find a plaster mold of serenity. Only

the lingering peak in her voice betrays her curiosity, but it's not my own interest in what she's saying that keeps me riveted to her face. It's her beauty, one rivaled only by that of the woman cutting my hair. Skin as pure as fresh honey, and deep, black eyes painted into exaggerated almonds. The other has silvery skin and corn-silk hair, woven delicately into braids around her head. Her lips are as red as fresh blood. Looking away, I imagine what they think of my dull copper hair and pasty skin. I don't look back up as they buff and remake me. I don't bother to speak. They finish and continue their idle gossip, never once addressing me, and I'm not sure if it is because I am beneath them or above them. When they're done, they leave me in the chair, and I finally brave a look at the mirrored walls around me. My image confronts me on every side, some staring back and others turning away like a stranger. In my simple robe, I look like my mother—older and more beautiful. I look like a woman.

Standing, I take a few steps forward to touch the cool glass. I've never spent much time at the mirror, but it's comforting to stand here now. A hundred images of me gazing back, proving my existence. I turn my name over in my head and try to attach it to this woman with scarlet hair that drapes down against her snowy robe, and emerald eyes set by dark gold lines against a smooth, sculpted face. This stranger. Myself. Adelice.

As I stare, unable to turn away, one of the mirrors cracks cleanly down the side and for a moment, startled, I back away, unsure how I've broken it. The crack grows to reveal a panel in the glass. A woman steps through, and it seals seamlessly behind her. She's wearing a tailored suit, and her raven hair is perfectly pinned into a twist. Her age doesn't show in her made-up face, but the angles of her cheekbones and the arch of her eyebrows set over her luminous but clearly artificial violet eyes make her look older to me. But it's the way she carries herself—it's the aura of control and authority reflected in her refined face and smart suit—that tells me this is no ordinary Spinster.

She doesn't speak at first. Instead she runs her eyes down me, and I wonder if it's permissible to speak to a Spinster. I think of the boy who carried me in the cells. *Play dumb*. I can't imagine keeping my tongue still and dry in my mouth day after day.

"Congratulations on your achievement," she whispers, and even in the empty room I strain to hear her. I catch my breath, afraid an inhale or

exhale will overwhelm her small voice.

“Not many make it to this point, Adelice. You should be proud.” Her smile doesn’t reach her false eyes. “My name is Maela, and it’s my job to welcome and train Eligibles. We’ve been processing the other girls. Orientation begins tomorrow. You almost missed it.”

“I’m sorry,” I mumble, as shame washes over me, forcing me to cast my eyes down to my bare feet.

“Sit,” Maela commands, pointing to the prep chair.

“The life of the Spinster is full of honor. You can do that which few can. You have power.” Her whisper-quiet voice is feverish.

“But, Adelice,” Maela purrs into my ear, “you must not presume you are in control.”

My heart is a war drum, pounding too loudly. She has been sent to break me or at least to begin the process, but it won’t work. I rub my thumb over the hourglass scar on my wrist and remember my father’s final words. I won’t let this woman scare me. But the memory of him burned into my skin sends a surge of renewed hatred seething through me. It burns through my chest and out into my arms, and I have to suppress the urge to attack this sly woman.

Maela towers behind me and strokes my hair. I breathe carefully—in and out—aware of each breath. I watch these strangers in the mirror as she smiles, showing rows of perfect teeth against her lipsticked mouth.

“We are set above those in Arras.” Her voice is steady now, and she speaks in a normal, conversational tone as she flicks stray bits of cut hair from my shoulders. “But you belong to the Guild.”

Belong. I swallow hard on the word and try to shove its bitterness down my throat.

“You will have everything.” She leans down and tucks her chin against my shoulder, taking my strange face into her cold, slick hand. “You will be beautiful and young.” She squeezes my face and looses a quiet, bell-like laugh as though we’re old friends or sisters confiding in one another. “Oh, Adelice, the life that awaits you …” With a sigh, Maela draws back up and studies us in the mirror. In one swift motion she raises a long, thin wand and I cringe back. She laughs again and strikes a match. A moment later the spark from her cigarette is flickering back at me in a thousand reflections.

“I’m almost jealous,” Maela says.

“I’m very honored.” I manage to push the words out of my mouth.

Her smile widens as I play her game. “Of course you are. Only someone very stupid would not want this life.”

She whirls around and somehow she doesn’t look foolish, but even more stunning, even more controlling. “Here, you are beautiful, Adelice. Here, you have a chance at something other than serving the ridiculous demands of men. Here,” Maela adds thoughtfully, “you are more than a secretary.”

I know from the way she watches my face that she’s mocking my mother, but I keep my gaze level with hers.

“But there’s just one thing you have to remember.” She breathes down on me, and the stench of her cigarette stings my nostrils. “There is no running away from here, Adelice Lewys.”

I feel the cosmetics hiding me now, and I see my mother reflected back at me in the mirror.

Do not let her see you worry. Give nothing away.

“There is no hiding.” Her sweet whisper sounds strangely like a hiss. “There is not even death. So choose now what side you are on.”

I stare back. I hear the boy’s final words to me, and I wonder what could possibly be worse than death. But I know the answer: cold stone and burning darkness.

“Of course.” My response is simple and I dare not test myself by speaking more.

Maela’s smile fades into a self-satisfied smirk, and I’m sure this is the only genuine emotion she’s displayed thus far.

“Well, then.” She pats my shoulder, dropping ash onto my robe. “Your room is waiting for you.”

“Maela,” I say, my voice timid but steady, “do you know what happened to my mother and sister?” I have to ask even though I’m terrified of showing her my weakness. I try to look strong.

“I can imagine,” she says, but instead of telling me what she thinks, she leaves me to my own desperate fantasies and calls for her assistant to join us. I’m surprised to see it’s a boy, but I suppose the girls here are busy with more important tasks. I watch as she whispers orders to him, throwing meaningful glances over her shoulder at me.

Her personal assistant escorts me to my new quarters. The sterile halls of the compound shift slowly as we enter the housing unit. First, the concrete changes to smooth wood. Then the white walls blossom: vermilion, garnet. We pass velvet divans and marble pillars and enter a bronze-gated elevator. It reminds me of Romen's metro hall, and I shudder, remembering the grotesque figures perched on the exterior corners of the hall of records there. Monsters carved from stone that leered down at the citizens, beautiful and terrifying.

Everything here throbs with brilliant energy, and yet there's an absence of real life. The elevator is silent, and my guide doesn't speak as we ride farther and farther up into the tower. I stand behind him and study how his gold hair glistens and waves against his shoulders. It's not typical Guild-approved grooming, but I suppose it's a perk of being an errand boy for such a powerful Spinster.

My room sits at the end of the hall behind a plum-lacquered door on the fifteenth floor. It's a beautiful apartment trimmed with carved woodwork painted in rich cream and subtle gold. At the far end, a fire blazes in a brick-and-wrought-iron hearth. Above it hangs a portrait of a woman who looks strangely like the new me. Intricate patterns decorate the woven rugs that stretch across the large room, and silk pillows in emerald and garnet and champagne lie scattered around small mahogany tables.

"I'll see that they deliver some supper to you. You missed the evening meal," my guide informs me. He watches as I wander around the room, and when I turn back, he's grinning.

"Th-th-thank you," I stammer.

"It's a bit of an upgrade from the cell, I imagine," he says, and I turn to look at him more carefully: it's the same boy who gave the order to sedate me in the rebound chamber. He's taller than I am, and his suit hugs his broad shoulders and rigid arms enough to show he has the strength necessary to be a bodyguard. But despite his powerful body, his face is fair and framed by delicate hair. It's the hair that perks my fuzzy memory of my retrieval night.

"You—" I stop short of accusing him.

"I'm sorry about that," he says, the cocky grin fading from his face. "Orders are orders. If it makes you feel better, you got off easy. Name's

Erik.”

I stare coldly at the hand he stretches out in greeting. *Sure, let’s be friends. You only left me in the cold with no food*.

The thought twists my stomach with hunger, reminding me that I’ve still not eaten since the few bites at the café in Nilus. “It doesn’t actually.”

Erik laughs and shakes his head, proving he’s a first-class jerk. “I’ll make sure they send you up plenty of food. You’ll begin training in the morning.”

I want to refuse the food and the fancy room with its luxurious furnishings. I want to crawl into a hole and starve slowly, but if I do I won’t be in a position to protect Amie or find out where my mother is, so I turn away from him instead. The door locks behind him, and I’m alone in this strange, new world.

FOUR

AS DAWN ARRIVES I rest on soft satin and cotton. My bed is a long cushion that runs the entire length of one wall, butting against floor-to-ceiling windows that look out over the Endless Sea. I imagine slipping my toes into the water, wondering if it is cold and if the salt would sting my feet as the sun creeps up and paints the water dusty pink and orange.

I've never been so comfortable in my whole life. A tray of half-eaten delicacies sits at my feet. My mom was an adequate cook, and she did the best she could with the rationed food available in our metro. But last night I ate duck in butter sauce. Rice with saffron and apricots. *Torta di cioccolato.* I only know the names of the foods because they're written on the small menu card tucked under the etched silver plate they came piled on.

Outside, a storm lingers on the periphery of my view, tainting the rose-colored morning. It's woven in for entertainment or local crops. The clouds build and swell with the coming rain. As I watch, the texture of the weave comes into focus, and I can see the additions of rain and lightning slowly snaking across the sky. I reach out to open the window and am surprised when my fingers make direct contact with the fibers, drawing the darkness toward me. There's no glass between me and the weave outside. But how can that be? I struggle to understand how I'm able to expand the thunderstorm from the confines of my quarters. Unless it's not a window I'm looking through. Looking closer I see that the weave of the window and the scene outside it are artificial, layered on top of the real weave of the room, like a painting done on top of a masterpiece. The original weave of the room is still visible when I strain to see it, but the artificial top layer only mimics that of the genuine article. I know because the golden bands that should be present are stagnant. Time isn't moving forward in this window, because it's not a real piece of Arras. It must be some type of program created to look like a real window with real scenery. As I consider that possibility, I lose track of my work. The storm swells in the clouds until they are ripe with

moisture. It looks so real that I almost believe the rain strands leave my fingers wet. My hands become heavy with the material knit through my fingers, and I drop the weave, shocked to discover how much is pooled across my lap. It dissipates as thunder crescendos and cracks along the false windowpanes. The rain pours down, a dam bursting the skyline. I wish I could weave tears into my eyes, loosing the constant ache from my chest. But they won't come, so I stare at the rain, which I've freed to fall from the bloated clouds.

I don't even notice she's watching me, wide-eyed and curious, until she clears her throat. I spin around awkwardly. She isn't much older than I am, but in typical Spinster fashion her honey-gold hair is piled in curls on top of her head and her black suit hugs her willowy figure, precisely tailored to fit her. She looks softer than most of the women I've met here so far, and her cosmetics are applied to highlight her graceful features rather than to draw unnecessary attention to her. Everything about her feels approachable and welcoming. And here I am lying around with last night's cosmetics smeared across my face, and a pile of half-eaten food at my feet.

She raises her hand as if to stop me from getting up. "I didn't mean to startle you. I thought you might be sleeping. I'm here to serve as your mentor. Call me Enora."

"Am I expected to be somewhere?" The words tumble out in a rush of speech that even I barely comprehend. "I can get dressed!"

But the word *dressed* stops me cold. I'm still wearing the robe from yesterday, and I don't own a stitch of clothing. I've spent an entire night in bed watching the waves, and I don't even know if I have a closet.

"Adelice." Enora says my name in a forceful but gentle tone. "Sit down and relax. Breakfast will be delivered soon. I'm here to discuss everything with you."

I'm rooted to the spot, still embarrassed at my total ignorance.

"Including your clothes," she assures me, as though she knows exactly what I'm thinking. I sit down, as instructed, on a large cushion in the middle of the room. Moments later heaping trays of food appear, wafting buttery, salty smells around us. The server lays out the food and plates on the small tables dotting the large space around the fireplace. My guest smiles and takes a seat in one of the few actual chairs the room

offers while the server stokes the dying embers in my hearth and adds fresh wood.

“You must have a million questions,” Enora begins warmly.

I nod, painfully aware of the gnawing growl of my stomach. Nerves and hunger—not a good combination.

“You’re hungry,” she points out, obviously attuned to the slight shake of my hands. “You eat, and I’ll talk. You can ask questions when you’re done.”

There is something easy and genuine about her. I get the sense that she, unlike Maela, can be trusted. I feel comfortable enough to slowly, and as politely as possible, begin shoving food in my mouth.

“I will be your mentor while you train to spin. I am a Guild-appointed Spinster and I assist the Creweler. I’m here to answer questions, provide advice, and offer moral support. Your first few years in the Coventry may require some … transition.” I can hear how carefully she chooses this word, but unlike the other Spinster, whose saccharine speech belied venom, this woman’s intentions are clear. She’s trying not to frighten me.

“What’s a Creweler?” The question is out of my mouth before I swallow, and despite her kind smile I’m ashamed of my crass behavior.

“In a moment. We have more pressing issues to discuss.”

As if on cue the door to my apartment swings open and several plainly dressed young girls roll large racks of wildly colored textiles into the entryway.

“Thank you.” Enora holds out a small card and one of the girls swiftly retrieves it with a curtsy. They are gone as quickly as they appeared.

“Your aestheticians sent your measurements to the mill last night and this is the start of your wardrobe,” she tells me, busily plucking through the hangers and pulling out a brilliant green dress and a charcoal suit. I hear her murmur something like “lovely” to herself.

“I know we have a dress code, but is there a reason I have to get so decked out?” I ask as she pulls another satin evening gown from the rack.

“Aren’t they beautiful?” she asks with her back to me.

“Yes.” And it’s the truth. “But where am I going to wear this?” I hold up a slinky gray dress. I’ve always understood why career women need to dress neatly for their bosses—my mother sported suits with gold

buttons and pressed lapels to the office daily—but I can't imagine weaving in an evening gown.

"It's one of the perks. Every girl attends her share of Guild dinner parties and then of course there're the *Bulletin* reports. You'll have occasion to wear them, but nothing this extravagant for everyday weaving," Enora assures me. "Sometimes the Guild calls girls who are very talented but lack the finesse necessary to work on the looms. It would be wasteful to put them to work in the quarters or in the kitchen, so they go to work as our seamstresses."

"What if I don't want to wear things like this?" I try to keep the challenge out of my voice, but it slips through anyway.

Enora stares at me, not blinking, before she answers, "Would you waste these girls' talents?"

"Why not send them home?" I immediately wish I could take the question back as her eyes flash to me and then to the garment rack.

"No one goes home," she responds evenly, but there's an edge to her voice and her fingers tremble as they weed through my new wardrobe.

"I guess I knew that."

"That won't be an issue for you," she chirps, clearly trying to lighten the mood. "You should know that whatever you say to me stays between us."

This strikes me as exactly the kind of thing you say when you're a spy, but my gut wants to believe her, so I merely nod.

"Good." Enora saunters over to sit on the cushion next to mine and lowers her voice. "What I saw you doing, Adelice—weaving without a loom. Have you done that before?"

It takes a moment to realize she is referring to the storm earlier. "Yes. Not often, though."

"And you don't need any instruments?" she presses, her voice the hint of a whisper.

"No." I'm confused, but I whisper along with her. "I've always been able to do it that way. But the windows aren't real …"

She nods conspiratorially.

"Of course not. Glass is breakable, and the Guild wants the Spinsters kept secure. It's basically a large screen created to look like a window. There's a special program coded to run scenic views throughout the

compound. There are no real windows. Nearly every wall here is a giant screen programmed to specific images. We have seasons and everything. Most girls never notice it's a program."

"It looks so real, but I wondered why I could touch it," I murmur.

Fear flashes through her chocolate-brown eyes.

"I need you to trust me. You must never tell anyone else you can do that. Always use a loom to weave—try not to do it without one, even when you are alone."

I raise my eyebrows. Her words remind me of the boy from the prison and his admonition to play dumb. They are keeping me alive, these kind tips from mysterious strangers. I consider telling her about my slip at testing, and that I'm sure Cormac already knows, but I'm not sure what good it would do.

"So they're like vlip screens then?" I clarify.

"Almost exactly, but much higher-tech than the ones available for home use. The images are more realistic."

She's right. I had thought it was a real window before I touched it and found it was so easy to manipulate. Something's bothering me though about how I changed the rainstorm. "If someone else were to touch it, would they be able to change it?"

"I've never seen anyone do that before," she admits. "Every Spinster here works the weave on looms. That's why you can't tell anyone about what I saw you do. Do you understand?"

I'm not certain how my weaving skills could possibly be dangerous to me now that I'm already locked away in the Coventry, but I nod that I will keep quiet about it.

"Smart girl," she breathes and then pops back onto her heels—back to business. "Your stylists can be expected to arrive at seven thirty. Please be bathed by then. That isn't their job. Should you require someone to wash you, I will appoint a hand servant."

"To wash me?" I repeat in disbelief. "In case I don't know how?"

My incredulity is rewarded by a short, amused laugh. "Some Spinsters prefer that someone else …"

"Do their dirty work?"

"Something like that." Enora grins, and I feel trust growing roots in my belly. Despite my best attempts to remain wary and detached, I like

Enora. Maybe this is how they'll break me—by giving me a friend.

"Valery is your primary aesthetician," she says. "She's kind and she won't make you look ridiculous."

I study Enora's delicate face and hair. "Is she your stylist?"

"She was …" She hesitates as though this subject is painful. Or maybe just off-limits. "You will be in training for the next month," she continues.

"It takes that long?" I ask, picking apart small cakes to remove dried fruits and nuts.

"For some," she says with a shrug. "Others are cleared more quickly, but everyone gets at least a month to prove herself."

"And if I don't prove myself?"

Enora bites her lip and pretends to inspect the shoes lining the carts displaying my new wardrobe.

"Will I go to work making clothes for the other Spinsters?" I ask, sounding too hopeful.

"Yes, some do, but others become servants here at the Coventry."

"They get to do the literal dirty work," I murmur. The hierarchy is clearer now, and I understand why it's important to fall into place.

"Yes, it happens. Many Eligibles find the amount of stress that naturally comes with weaving to be too much. Their work lacks the focus and precision necessary of a Spinster."

I hate to admit it, but this makes sense. You don't want someone with shaky hands working with the weave. It's so delicate that it could be disastrous. "But how do we learn?"

"To weave?" she asks.

"Yes." I bite my lip. "What if I make a mistake?"

"Well, I'm not terribly worried about your ability, but you will be monitored. Spinsters follow close patterns established by the Creweler. Once you've spent some time on the practice sections and learned the various patterns, the work is fairly simple. It will be a while before you advance to ripping and altering."

"Ripping?" The word scratches across my tongue. I'm not sure I want to know what it means.

"It's not as bad as it sounds," Enora says, but her voice is unconvincing. "It merely refers to removing weak or brittle threads."

“By ‘threads,’ you mean people?”

There’s a slight pause before she says, “Yes.”

“So when you rip, you’re killing someone?” I remember my mother crying outside my grandmother’s hospital room after a stern nurse sent us away for a moment; we never saw my grandmother again.

“It’s much more humane than what used to happen,” Enora continues, her warm chocolate eyes misting over a little. “In the past, people watched their loved ones die, and then buried their bodies.”

“What happens to people when they’re ripped?” I whisper, recalling my grandmother’s fragile hand squeezing mine tightly before we were sent to the hallway, still so strong.

“Honestly, I don’t know,” she says. “I’m sorry, it’s just not my department.”

It’s obvious from the tone of her voice. This conversation is over.

“You’ve mentioned the Creweler twice,” I say, shifting topics and hoping she’s game to answer a few more questions. “What exactly does she do?”

Enora smiles and something about the way her eyes dull tells me this is going to be a rehearsed answer. “The Creweler helps the Guild harvest raw materials for the weave of Arras, and she guides our own work.”

“So I’ll be working under her then?” For one brief moment, I want to ask if Maela is the Creweler, but if she is, I’d rather not know.

“No,” Enora says in a heavy voice. “Her work is delicate and time-consuming. She rarely interacts with anyone but the officials and highest-ranked Spinsters. There’s a lot you’ll have to learn about how things work here, Adelice.”

Somehow this doesn’t surprise me, but I hold back the comment I want to make.

“I’m sorry, I have a lot of questions,” I say instead. I want her to like me. I need allies here, but her dismissal leaves a bitter taste in my mouth.

“I can’t blame you. It’s been a difficult transition for you.” She stumbles on “transition,” and I realize how inadequate it sounds. With a full belly and a warm fire, it’s been easy to forget my initial imprisonment, but now doubt creeps back up my spine and down through my limbs, shooting a chill along my nerves. I hate myself for forgetting

what they did to me—to my whole family—after two hot meals and a night of luxury.

Enora glides over and waves me to my feet. Moments later she's fussily holding up ensembles, one after another, and muttering and sighing her disapproval. I see silk and satin, and each outfit looks skimpier than the last. I was never allowed to wear anything so revealing back home. It wouldn't have been proper for me to show my arms, let alone my flat chest. Between my guilt and my complete fear of anything without sleeves, I begin cracking my knuckles. Enora notices and leads me to the bathroom. My mom used to do the same thing—distract me when I was upset. Now that the Valpron has long worn off, I feel a constant throbbing ache when I think of my family. With the clutching pain of hunger loosened, it's become more acute. Almost unbearable.

"Enora," I whisper, as she waves her hand over the switch scan, "do you know what happened to my family?"

Enora gives me a slight shake of the head, but I can see the understanding in her eyes. "I'll see what I can find out, but, for now, you need to get ready for orientation."

The bathroom is every bit as oversized and decadent as my sleeping chamber. At one end, a small station with an aesthetician's chair waits ominously. I can only imagine how many hours I'll waste being fussed over there. The rest of the room is tiled in marble and porcelain. In the center sits a large bath with small marble steps and benches carved along its edges. I could easily swim in it. It's already full and I wonder how this has been taken care of without my knowledge, like so many things here at the Coventry. I'm not sure I want to know the answer. There are no faucets or spouts easily accessible, but I dip my toe gingerly at the edge and discover it's hot. The thought of heat soaking into my skin is so tempting. I'm pretty sure I would sell my soul for a bath after the nights in the cell.

"Your profile indicated that you liked water, so this was created for you." Enora points to the extravagant pool. "And you were appointed an ocean view."

"I would have been fine with a shower stall," I mutter.

"We could arrange to have it changed …" she says, a smirk playing on her lips, but I quickly shake my head, recalling the cramped old tub in

my family’s one bathroom.

“It’ll be fine,” I say.

“I thought it would be.” She chuckles and takes my arm, shepherding me to the chair at the far end. “Valery is here to work on you.”

I sigh and flop down in the chair, resigned to my fate. Valery is almost as beautiful as Enora or Maela. But her features are Eastern in origin, her eyes sloping elegantly around toffee irises. Even in her heels, she’s much smaller than the rest of us. I’m beginning to understand why Spinsters are so finely polished. They could never allow other, inferior women to be more beautiful than they are. Staring at the number of prep tools on the cart next to me, I can’t help wondering how much time they waste in pursuit of perfection.

After an hour of lining and curling and spraying, Enora brings in her final choice for today’s outfit—a peacock-green suit that puffs at the sleeves and tapers to my knees. It is at once perfectly understated and completely unmissable. I slip into it and then grip the post of my bed while Enora hands me a pump.

“Wrong foot,” I say, passing it back to her. “Left first, please.”

She gives it to me with a raised eyebrow. “Superstitious? I’ve never heard that before.”

“Not superstitious.” I shake my head. “My grandmother always told me to put my left shoe on first, because my left leg’s stronger than my right. Easier to stand on one heel.” I slide on the shoe and demonstrate my perfect balance.

“Are you left-handed as well?” she asks.

“Yes, my grandmother was, too.” The memory of her tugs at me; it’s an old sadness, more of a ghost than an ache, although it pulls harder on me here than it has for years. It’s different from the hot, panicked grief I feel for my family.

Enora hands me my other shoe, and Valery pushes me toward the mirror. The image is not the shock it was yesterday, but this girl with the brilliant hair and bright eyes is not me. I’m simply dressed in someone else’s skin.

Valery and Enora stand behind me like proud parents. My new mentor places a hand gently on my shoulder. “You’re stunning, Adelice.”

“This isn’t me,” I say, watching the strange scarlet lips move.

“It is now,” Enora whispers firmly. I can hear in her voice the same tone I use with Amie when I know what’s best for her, even when it’s something she hates, like brussels sprouts. I wonder if she has anyone watching over her now. I feel the panic creeping from my belly into my throat, but my reflection doesn’t change.

Now that I’m dressed, Enora escorts me to my first training class. I try to memorize the route—what my hall looks like, which floor to choose on the elevator—on the off chance that I’m ever allowed to move around the compound alone. We don’t pass through the same sterile hallway we used yesterday. Instead she guides me out into a beautiful garden surrounded by the high towered walls of the Coventry. Sunlight radiates down on us directly, creating a bright spot in the center of a concrete fortress. Palm trees shade small, prickly pines. Animals scamper peacefully at my feet. It is the most wild—but tame—place I’ve ever been. Just when I’m sure it’s all screens like the ones in my room, reflecting a preprogrammed code, I spy him and a thrill sends my heart into my throat.

Crouched next to a wheelbarrow and wiping his forehead with a simple rag, there he is: the boy from the cells. A gardener, an escort? What other jobs does he occupy here and why? He glances up as we pass, and then he looks more closely, and I feel a tense energy fill the space between us—the force of it almost palpable. He’s taking in my vibrant tailored suit and new face. He looks puzzled for a moment, then something darker flickers across his face. It’s not anger or hatred. It’s not even lust.

It’s disappointment.

FIVE

ENORA PUSHES PAST THE YOUNG MAN and hurries me along to another tower door on the far side of the garden. I fight the urge to turn back to him. What would I do? Apologize? Explain myself? What did he expect? Did he think I was going to set fire to the compound and run away, hungry and cold?

"Adelice." Enora's voice breaks into my thoughts.

"Sorry?"

"Try to pay closer attention during your orientation," she says with a sigh, ushering me inside the other wing of the compound.

"It's just …" I struggle with exactly how to express my confused feelings about the boy in the garden. "Why are there boys here?"

"There are a lot of tasks we can't do for ourselves," she says matter-of-factly.

I give a slight nod, but I can't quite hide the fact that I don't buy it.

"Spinsters have important work to do," Enora says, lowering her voice. "The men make sure everything around here functions, and …" Her voice trails off and I can see she's making a choice.

"And?" I prompt.

"They're security," she finishes.

"Are we in danger?" I ask in surprise.

"Us? No," she says, and there's a bitter edge to her voice. "The Guild isn't keen on a compound made up entirely of women."

Enora wasn't lying when she said she'd answer my questions, but I'm taken back by the trust she's shown me already. Considering she knows my biggest secret, I suppose it makes sense.

"You'll be with the rest of the Eligibles today. Make friends," she says, changing the subject to the task at hand.

"It's the first day of academy all over again," I mutter, eyeing the gaggle of women gathered around a large oak door.

"Yes," she says, taking my shoulders in her tiny hands and directing my eyes back to hers. "But you'll live with these girls for the rest of your

life.”

I swallow hard. Academy doesn’t seem so long ago, and yet the faces of the girls in my class are slipping away. It was one long beauty contest, each girl treading a fine line, maintaining the purity standards expected of Eligibles, while doing everything in her power to outshine the rest. Every week, someone had discovered something close to, but not quite, a cosmetic. I hadn’t been very good at gushing and primping. Pinch my cheeks? No thanks. Cosmetics and beauty treatments might be a reward for good behavior growing up, and necessary when finally stepping into the less segregated work world, but here they feel like an even bigger joke than purity standards. As though we’ll be happy to waste away behind locked doors if we can look pretty.

Making my way to join the group, I try to maintain a neutral expression. We’re crowded in a plain hallway, waiting for the door in front of us to open. But the other girls, having broken into several smaller groups, maintain a steady stream of chatter with one another. It’s a motley group—a lithe girl with delicately braided oil-black hair; another with skin the color of rich coffee, her hair short and waved close to her scalp; girls with platinum hair and tailored blouses. I wonder if they are excited or nervous. If they have sold their souls for large bathtubs and fireplaces. If they’ll do anything the Guild asks of them.

Two young officers usher us into a vast, open space filled with rows and rows of carefully placed chairs pointed toward a blank white wall. We file in and take our seats. The other girls sit together, giggling and chattering. I watch as a blond girl reaches to touch the hair of the girl next to her. They’re so familiar with one another. These girls weren’t kept in cells, and they’ve obviously spent time together before now. I’ve missed a lot in the last few days.

The girl with oil-black hair drops into the chair next to mine. I can smell a rich hint of coconut drifting from her. Up close her skin is tawny, and her long legs stream past her pencil skirt. She must be half a foot taller than me at least—without heels. I can’t help but feel a little jealous of her exotic beauty as well as how relaxed she is in her new role. To my surprise she turns to speak to me. “They’ve broken us into two groups. You’re in mine.”

“Do I look lost?” I ask with a sheepish grin.

“No, you look overwhelmed,” she responds. “It’s easy to tell you’re new, because most of us room together.”

I lower my voice to match hers: “Together?”

“Not everyone gets her own room.” She grins, displaying a dazzling white smile set against chocolate lips.

“I’m sorry, you seem to have me at an advantage,” I say, curious as to how this girl knows me or my situation. “I’m Adelice.”

“I know,” she says. “My name is Pryana, and my mother was a maid in a small hotel for businessmen. She taught me that if you want to know the best gossip, you should get to know your maids. And right now, the best gossip around involves you.”

I think of the girls and boys bringing me food, stoking my fire, delivering my clothes, and feel like an elitist snob. I’m sure that’s how I come off to them—an eager young Eligible hungry for power. It never occurred to me that they could be sources of information. Or that they were watching me.

“I’ll keep that in mind.”

“Well, be careful,” Pryana says, dropping her voice even further so that our conversation is lost among the flurry of gossip. “At your level, they pay more attention to who they have attending you. And with your history—”

“My level?”

“Girl, do you think we are all living in the lap of luxury? Do not get me wrong, I am very pleased with my current situation. But everyone in the Coventry wonders what landed a simple Eligible in the high tower.”

“I clearly need to befriend a maid,” I mutter. My mind is swimming with this new information. I have a pretty good idea why I’m getting special treatment, and it has nothing to do with favoritism.

Pryana gives me a skeptical look, unconvinced I’m the innocent I claim to be. But if she’s going to press the matter, she doesn’t get the chance because a brilliant display of color lights up the blank wall we face. It fades in along the edges and gradually forms into the shape of a woman. The vlip is holographic, giving it the appearance of three dimensions. As though the woman were in the room with us, and not a mere recording.

“Welcome to training,” the holograph says with a smile. “Being called to serve the Guild of Twelve is an honor and with honor comes privilege. The Western Coventry wants to ensure your transition into your new life as a Spinster is smooth and joyful. Each of you will be assigned a mentor during the training process. She will answer your questions and provide guidance on appropriate behavior and dress.”

I look around the aisles. The other girls’ eyes are glued to the vlip. Pryana catches my eye and grins.

“Arras depends on girls like you,” the actress in the vlip continues. “The Guild is a complex organization charged with the care of our entire world, and you are a vital piece of our oligarchy. During training you will be observed as you complete a variety of tasks designed to test your skill, precision, and dedication to preserving the integrity of Arras. Your work will be carefully supervised as you learn how to read the specific patterns of our world, and your behavior will be monitored by security personnel and audio surveillance to ensure the safety of everyone in the compound. This is precious information given to you in confidence of your allegiance to the Guild of Twelve. Each of you was brought here because you exhibited the potential to become a Spinster, but your placement and position within the Coventry will be made based on the observations of our specially appointed training panel.”

A few of the girls murmur in surprise at this news. They must not have been appointed mentors yet. I almost feel sorry that some of them have left everything they know and love behind to wind up as servants. Almost.

“Rest assured that once you have been called by the Guild, you have a place here. There are opportunities for every girl’s skills in the Western Coventry, and regardless of where in Manipulation Services you are ultimately placed, you will enjoy many of the privileges allotted to Spinsters. Due to the sensitive nature of your training, it is impossible for you to return to civilian lives, but you will each have a home and job here from this day forward.”

“What exactly does that mean?” Pryana hisses beside me.

“It means”—I lean in so only she can hear—“that some of us might wind up scrubbing kitchen floors.”

Her eyes widen, but she shakes her head in disbelief.

“Ever ask your maid how she landed a job cleaning your toilet?” I ask.

“I will now.”

I can’t imagine anyone could be charming enough to prompt a former Eligible to reveal her rejection. It’s one thing to be catty about others’ misfortunes but harder to admit your own.

“Your duties will be assigned based on skill level. There are always opportunities for advancement for loyal Spinsters of the Guild,” the holographic woman continues. Behind her an enormous machine flickers into view on the screen. It’s a loom, like the one they presented me with in testing, only bigger. Gears and wheels grind together silently, connected to a series of intricate silver tubes. As she speaks, sparkling strands weave across it in a mixture of gold and other colors. I know from experience that the gold is time, and when I focus hard enough to see the weave around me, these strands flow across, forming bands. The other strands weave through the bands, forming a tight, colorful tapestry.

Before this moment, I’ve only seen looms during testing, and then I spent so much time ignoring my compulsion to touch the weave that its subtlety was lost on me. Now it shimmers with life. But as I watch, the image on the screen changes. The gears of the loom adjust, zooming in on a portion of the weave on the loom. First, the fibers suggest an aerial view of a neighborhood. Then the weave is focused more closely until it reveals the image of a street. And finally, the weave reveals a family sitting inside their home. The vlip then winds the image back to the complex weave it first showed us.

“Spinsters work hand in hand with the men who oversee the Guild of Twelve. In the Western Coventry compound, your work will be focused on basic weaving, maintenance, and Crewel work. Our compound is responsible for food and weather, and our most advanced Spinsters handle special issues specific to our sector. You were each transported to this facility based on your aptitude tests. Should you develop skills in other areas, the Guild may issue a transfer of assignment at any time. All four coventries work together to maintain the physical integrity of Arras’ weave and to ensure our world is bound together in safety and prosperity. Each coventry is carefully located to provide optimum control over the weave, and while each has specific tasks assigned to the women working

its looms, all are of equal importance. Advanced Spinsters may perform Crewel work, a form of manipulation that adds to Arras and controls elements crucial to our survival.

“The peace and prosperity of Arras are enabled through your work on the looms. Following patterns strictly to ensure the metros function smoothly, and monitoring the weave for evidence of deterioration, allow us to catch dangerous behavior and conditions before they can affect the safety of our citizens. Special techniques have been designed to clean and renew threads damaged by aberrant tendencies. We work closely with academies across the world to catch deviants at a young age. This ensures a crime- and accident-free population. We rely on you to report any irregularities found in the weave in a timely manner.”

So that’s what Cormac meant when he laughed at me in the café. Arras isn’t as peaceful as the Stream and officials would have us believe, at least not naturally. Whatever this procedure is that cleans strands, I’m sure it’s what they used in Romen after my disastrous retrieval. Would citizens feel as safe knowing deviant behavior exists but is merely wiped away from recollection? Or that their children’s threads can be cleaned at any time if a teacher expresses concern? For the first time, I’m glad I’m not a teacher put in that impossible situation. And I understand the gilded cage of false windows and concrete they keep us in. We can never go home with this knowledge.

The vlip fades from the holographic message to a slideshow of images from across Arras, drawing my attention away from this revelation. I’m glued to the images now, but to my disappointment, the metros on the vlip look the same as Romen—concrete, sky towers with thousands of windows spiking up from the metro center, and small houses and stores dotting the perimeter in perfect spirals. The plants are the only parts of the landscapes that seem to vary. In Romen, we had grass and looming elm trees, bushes, and carefully preened flowers in yellow and white. But these metros have palm trees, pines, ferns, and tall yellow grass; these are plants I’ve only seen on screens during academy lessons. The differences are minute, but seeing all of Arras before me is exciting.

“Welcome to the Western Coventry and may your hands be blessed,” the woman’s voice concludes.

The final image is one of a towering complex that I've seen dozens of times in academy. It's where I sit now: the Western Coventry. Several girls squeal with delight but I feel the weight of the concrete and brick pressing down on me. There's nothing exciting about the compound. It's walled. Industrial. It's what it stands for—the promise of power and privilege—that thrills the others. But all I see is the lack of windows and how it rises like an endless cage into the cloudless sky. No one can ever escape it.

"You don't look so good," Pryana whispers to me as the vlip fades away. "Did the images give you motion sickness?"

I shake my head, genuinely pleased by her concern. "I'm fine. It's just been a long few days."

"Well, I for one am ready to get on those looms. I've been dying to since testing," she says, her coffee-black eyes sparkling at the prospect.

"You haven't gotten to try them out yet?" I ask, more than a little surprised.

"No," Pryana confirms. "So far it's been measurements, etiquette lessons, and small-group vlips. Let's see. We've been reminded at least a hundred times about the importance of chastity to maintain our skills."

"Not much of a chance that will be an issue here." I laugh at her annoyed look.

"Are you kidding me?" she says, rolling her eyes. "Have you seen him?"

She points to the door, and I look over to see Erik waiting to usher us to our next session. Enora is nowhere in sight, but I guess most of the Spinsters are working.

"Him?" I ask nonchalantly.

"Come on, he's gorgeous," she gushes. "If half the officers look half as good as him, they'll need to show me that stupid purity-standards vlip every day."

I have to admit she's right. Today his wild blond hair is smoothed back and it neatly brushes the shoulders of his dark pinstriped suit. I wonder if it was his skills or his looks that got him the job assisting Maela. But Pryana's blatant attention is a bit much. I can't help but notice now the reactions of the girls in the room to his entrance. Several glance over shyly, others sit up and thrust their chests forward, but every girl is

aware of him. I suppose it’s not so surprising given segregation. Someone like Erik, or any of the many officers, is the first contact most of us have had with boys close to our own age. I don’t want to shrink down like some of them, as though I’m embarrassed by my femininity. But maybe that explains my sharp tongue when I’m around them, or the way the strange boy made my heart race as he led me from the cells.

“Yeah, he’s cute,” I say, trying to be friendly. “His hair is awfully long though. I’m surprised they let him wear it that way.”

“I guess they’re not going to have any problems with you and purity standards,” Pryana teases. “Besides, I hear long hair is common in coastal villages like Saxun. Oh, it’s time to go!”

Most of the girls are already in the hallway, and Erik takes the lead, while several other officers trail behind us.

“Ladies, today I’ll be leading you on a tour of the compound. As you may know, I assist Maela, the Spinster in charge of training, but her duties require her on the loom today. We’ll be visiting the studios and departments housed in the Western Coventry,” Erik says loudly, so the whole group can hear. “Rest assured that I’ve been well trained to guide you.”

“Drat,” Pryana mutters. “No looms, but at least we get to follow him around today.”

Instead of agreeing with her, I grab her arm and drag her to the front of the group. I’m not missing a minute of this tour. Erik raises one eyebrow as I push to the front, but he doesn’t say anything.

“Girl,” Pryana whispers, “he’s looking at you.”

“Yeah, because I knocked over half the group to get up here,” I whisper back.

“About that—I like your style.”

I give her an appreciative grin, and then turn my attention back to Erik, who has continued his spiel. At the end of the hallway, three corridors split off, and he leads us into the left-most one.

“Most of you will be working in entry-level positions,” he says as he opens a door into a large room. Inside, rows of small looms form perfect lines and each is occupied by a Spinster busily working with her piece of Arras. On the far wall, a couple of square windows allow light to stream through, but the packed atmosphere of the studio is claustrophobic.

“You’d think they could give us more light,” Pryana says.

“Especially since those aren’t real windows,” I mutter back. Out of the corner of my eye, I see Erik frown.

“Not real windows?” Pryana repeats.

Between her surprise and Erik’s annoyed look, I realize I’m not supposed to know that the walls and windows of the compound are programmed screens. Wild creatures are happy enough if they don’t know they’re being kept in a cage.

“Yeah, the windows in my room are huge,” I lie. “They could put bigger windows in the studios.”

Pryana relaxes, happy to believe my explanation, but Erik tilts his head and stares me down before he motions for the group to move on.

“At the entry level, you will handle rationing—weaving food from the farm cities into cities across Arras. You may also watch for loose threads or any other signs of decay,” he tells us as we pass room after room like the first one. There must be hundreds of Spinsters focused on these simple tasks.

“From there,” he continues, leading us into a new passage, “you may progress to studios that focus on weather, ensuring the right amount of precipitation falls throughout each sector. In others, you may perform standard removals and alterations like rebounds.”

The weather studios are roomier and only a dozen or so girls work in each. The looms they occupy are larger, and none of them seem to notice the new girls watching them. Or maybe they don’t care.

“I think I’d rather work here,” Pryana says to me.

I have to agree with her. I’m not sure I could handle the stuffiness of the earlier rooms, or the menial tasks expected of entry-level Spinsters.

“The most gifted Spinsters will work in the next wing, though,” Erik calls to the crowd.

We follow him out of the passage and into a circular room. The heavy door to these studios is guarded and requires security clearance.

“Unfortunately, the work done in these studios is so sensitive that we can’t risk interrupting the Spinsters working there,” he says.

The girls around me groan and hiss, but he raises a hand to indicate he wants to finish his lecture.

“I understand that it’s disappointing, but it’s also necessary. The upper studios house the Emergency Department, which ensures no accidents occur in the Western Sector. They also house our Western Department of Origins. The Spinsters there oversee the delivery of babies into Arras.”

“Say what?” Pryana asks loudly, and a few girls around us chuckle. “There’s babies up there?”

Erik shakes his head, but I spy a smile tugging at his lips.

“No,” he reassures her. “The process of bringing new life into Arras is very precise. Once a pregnancy has been approved through local Guild clinics, the department of origins in that sector works in tandem with the local doctors and hospitals to bring the new life into Arras smoothly. To accomplish this, Spinsters schedule births, so the new thread can be woven in as the baby is delivered by the doctor and surgical team. It’s a routine procedure here at the Coventry, but it requires a delicate touch.”

“I want to deliver babies,” a short girl with light brown hair says. “Wouldn’t that be so nice?”

I nod my head automatically, but my mind is on my mother and the scar that marred her perfect figure, right across her belly. My parents made sure I knew how babies were made, insisting it was unfair to expect me to meet purity standards without knowing what I had to stay away from, but they never explained how babies actually came into the world. Now I understood why it was impossible for her to have another child without permission. And all those years I had pleaded with her to have a baby and talked back when she said it was impossible. Why couldn’t she have opened up more to me about the expectations and rules? Maybe then I would have known to run from retrieval instead of waiting in my chair for them to come.

“What else is up there?” Pryana asks Erik, edging a little too close to him.

I watch as she ventures from the safety of our group. She’s so at ease, clearly secure in her tight dress suit that shows off her long, amber legs. I can’t help marveling at the way confidence rolls off her, and if I’m being honest, I’m a bit jealous, too. Erik barely notices her, though, which means he’s either very good at his job or my suspicion that he’s more than Maela’s personal assistant is correct.

“Everything else is classified information,” he says, stepping away from Pryana and beckoning to the group to show that it’s time to go.

“Maybe he doesn’t like girls,” Pryana mutters as she drifts back over to me.

“He’s trained to keep us at a distance,” I say. “I doubt he’d last long here if all the new Spinsters couldn’t keep their purity standards around him.”

“You’re probably right,” she says with a sigh. “I can keep looking at him though.”

We continue on our tour, and I struggle between wanting to ask Pryana about everything I missed and trying to play it cool. Thankfully, she seems eager to fill me in on all the gossip.

“We had ten retrievals in Cypress,” she says as we walk with the group. “I think it broke some kind of record.”

I hear pride in her voice.

“And they found you all at testing?” I ask, wondering if girls from Romen are particularly untalented.

“Of course,” Pryana says. “They’re up there mostly.”

She points to the girls who had trailed at the back of the original group and now led it. They have the same shiny black hair and tawny skin as she does.

“Were you friends with any of them?” I ask.

Pryana shakes her head in disgust.

“No, girls in that town only care about getting their courtship appointments. Northern cities are like that. I hear they’re more ambitious in the East.”

I wonder for a moment what they say about us westerners, but I don’t ask. I’m more interested in why Pryana wants to be here. “What about you?” I ask. “What about your family? Were they happy you were called?”

“Sure,” she says, looking at me like I’m crazy. “My mom’s a maid. She always dreamed I’d move up, and my kid sister can’t wait to get called in a few years.”

My heart aches at the thought of Pryana possibly getting to see her sister in a few years. After my parents’ struggle, the Guild will probably ensure that Amie never winds up here, even if she is called. And I’m

more than a little jealous of how easily Pryana is adjusting to her new life.

To my surprise, when we reach the entrance to this wing of the compound, we're stopped. Erik whispers with another guard and disappears into the next room. Instead of leading us forward, the guard motions that we should wait here. A few moments later, more guards appear, and my stomach twists. We're asked to return to the hallway, and then we're herded to a long, winding staircase. We climb up the towers like the tragic princesses in the family storybooks secreted away in my parents' cubbies.

The staircase opens into a grand stone room with oddly shaped windows speckling the walls, too small to fit through but easy to see out of—the kind of room you hide a girl away in. Everywhere there are large, steel looms like the ones from the vlip, but these are cold and slick and empty. Each connects to the others through a series of gears and wheels. Tubes run along the walls, curving and wrapping around the great steel beasts. Evenly spaced around the room are short padded stools. I wonder if they've dismissed the Spinsters who work here so we can use the machines.

The other girls point and whisper, with wide eyes, and I feel left out again.

Maela, looking as stunning as she did in the room of mirrors, sweeps into the room followed by Erik and another bodyguard. The other guard's hair is buzzed close to his scalp, but both men are perfectly angular, striking, and clearly dangerous. Maela towers in front of us, her crimson dress a splash of blood against the dark backdrop of the men. I know she wants to intimidate us, but I straighten up and raise my jaw ever so slightly to show it's not working.

"Good afternoon," she trills, flourishing her arms. "Today we begin your journey to becoming Spinsters, and you will have your first test. It will measure your natural ability to read the weave and your control over your ability. It will also provide immeasurable benefit to the cities you see before you now."

Several girls applaud this announcement, but I stare straight ahead.

"We have an unexpected treat for you. Normally you wouldn't have access to a real loom until your talent has been confirmed and honed, but

we have occasion to do a little preemptive pruning this year. I know how excited you are to have this opportunity." Her eyes flick over to me as she speaks. "But as the orientation vlip told you, not all of you will become Spinsters."

The group around me shifts and fidgets. The buzz of delight that filled the group an hour ago has faded into quiet panic.

"Rest assured that when you were invited—"

I laugh before I can stop myself.

"Adelice, is something humorous?" Maela asks sharply, and every head swivels around to stare at me.

"You reminded me of something that happened earlier." I smile, forcing myself to meet her gaze. "But please continue."

If looks could kill.

"As I was saying …" Maela only misses a beat, but I'm sure I've drawn unnecessary attention to myself. "You will all remain here in service to the Coventry. Many of those dismissed from Spinning or Crewel work are quite happy working in our mill or in various other necessary positions."

Like as maids and servants.

"There will always be a place for you here." Maela gives a precise sort of smile.

Many of the girls look pacified, although a few seem to be considering what they've just been told.

"One of the most important aspects of Spinning is the removal of weak strands. Each person, object, and place within Arras has its own thread—or in the case of a place, a woven section. We maintain Arras by redistributing, adding, and removing these strands and sections of the whole. If one thread is weak, it jeopardizes the others around it. The weave is pliable, allowing for some flexibility within the cities, and for our work, of course. But put simply, some threads are more resilient than others. We must be careful to repair and replace when necessary, but we must also remove at times."

She is speaking directly to me now. "If too many strands are weak, it compromises large sections, and as you can imagine, this puts everyone at risk." She breaks eye contact with me to seek affirmation from her silent audience.

The other Eligibles nod earnestly. I don’t. Next to me Pryana bumps my arm as though she’s urging me to join in and agree.

No one asks any questions. They bob their heads in synchronized conformity as though *why* we are being asked to do these things is trivial. All that matters is doing what the Guild asks us, because they say it’s important. Doesn’t the gradual ebbing of the time bands spark curiosity? Don’t they want to know how the machines help us work? I’m not in a position, as Maela’s least favorite student, to ask these questions, and no one else seems to care.

“Today you will each be completing your first removal,” Maela tells us.

“You mean ripping?” Pryana asks. For a brief moment the muscles of Maela’s jaw visibly tense, but she remains composed.

I think I like Pryana enough to make friends, like Enora instructed.

“Yes, some people refer to it as such. I find the term vulgar,” Maela answers smoothly, but her jaw is still tensed.

I find the whole thing vulgar, but I bite my tongue so as not to attract her wrath or more attention from her rapt disciples.

Maela nods to Erik, who steps toward the far wall and presses a series of buttons. The other girls watch him. Even Pryana’s gaze is greedy as he strides by. As soon as he enters the code, glistening, nearly transparent tapestries appear on the strange steel looms dotting the room. The appearance of the weave is the only thing that can tear their attention from him. Many of the girls gasp, and one even shrinks back as if the mere sight scares her. For girls who’ve only touched a practice loom at testing, the sight of Arras laid before them must be overwhelming. Even though I’ve always been able to visualize the weave, seeing it like this, called up for our use, makes my stomach knot.

“Can you see the weave without a loom?” The question is out of my mouth before I can swallow it back, but I need to know how big a freak I am.

Erik stares at me curiously, but Maela looks annoyed at the interruption.

“No, that’s ridiculous. The weave is the very time and matter that we occupy. Of course you can’t just see it,” she snaps.

Except, *of course* I can. But apparently she can't, and judging from the looks on the others' faces, neither can they. I'm alone in this ability.

"This," she continues, gesturing to a large ornate piece woven with vibrant greens, pinks, and reds, "is you."

The girls crowd closer together and press forward to see the brilliant weave.

"We're beautiful," a petite girl notes with awe.

"Of course you are," Maela coos. "The rest of these pieces are from various cities within the Western Sector. The looms allow us to call up and view the actual fabric of Arras, and each day the Spinsters prune the parts of the weave that are our responsibility. They check for brittle threads, and they handle any removal requests we receive through proper authorities."

She demonstrates how to adjust the settings on the loom to pull the weave's image into more detailed focus. As we watch, the piece of Arras on the loom zooms from a swirling array of colors and light into the subtle image of a house.

"You can request removal?"

"Yes, certainly. Individuals may request removal as well as law enforcement officials. Hospital staff submit removal requests for individuals in poor health and for the elderly."

I think of my grandmother and wonder who put in her request—certainly not she or my mother. She wasn't weak enough to need removal. My eyes smart at the idea of some doctor deciding it was her time to go.

"These looms feature areas where maintenance is needed. We will visit each, and you will be given a chance to identify the weak point and remove it. Although the looms are equipped to allow you to zoom in and out of the piece as necessary and even to locate very specific strands, there's a certain skill to being able to find the weakness without using the magnifiers and locators."

I shift uncomfortably in my heels and notice several other Eligibles doing the same. It's a lot to ask considering we're so new.

"No need to be frightened," Maela says reassuringly, obviously sensing the apprehension around her. "You simply use your fingers to read the weave. Watch."

Moving to the nearest loom, Maela traces a long, polished finger over the surface, from left to right, moving in lines down the piece until her hand stops. Closing her eyes briefly, Maela lets her hand rest there.

“Here,” she says, and the group goes utterly still. “It is thinner than the rest. Worn and tired. I can feel the stress it is placing on the other threads nearby. They are doing more than their fair share to keep everything together.”

No one breathes as Maela takes a long silver instrument from the caddy at the edge of the loom. “Simply hook this end,” she says as she gently threads the crook between the strands and with a swift motion rends the piece. A shimmering thread hangs from the end of the hook and she holds it out for us to inspect. “Simple.”

My stomach flips over. What does it feel like to be removed? The piece still exists, but where is that person now?

“Now, who is ready for her turn?” asks Maela.

A dozen girls crowd forward, eager to prove themselves. Pryana meets my eye, and I see horror reflecting back in her almond eyes. At least I’m not the only one sickened by this test.

Girl after girl steps up and attempts the test. One girl nearly takes out an entire section, but Maela swiftly stops her. I wonder if her mistake will doom her to a life slaving away at the mercy of the Coventry. Soon only Pryana and I are left. I see how unnerved she is, and I step forward, not only to give her a few more moments to compose herself, but also to get it over with.

Maela leads me to a new piece. It is more intricately woven than the other pieces we’ve seen so far; thousands of glinting threads lace and wind together in a rainbow canvas of light. A few girls eye it apprehensively. It is much more complex than the rest, but it’s not what scares me.

“Let’s see what you can do,” she says encouragingly.

I reach forward and softly touch my fingertips to the piece. The sensation is shocking. I’ve touched pieces of a weave before, but never sections that contained people. There’s a charge running through the piece, and I realize that what I’m feeling is the energy of the thousands of lives that rest under my fingers. Despite the complexity, my hand immediately senses the weakness. It’s so minuscule I can’t imagine

trying to remove it without damaging all the other strands around it. I also can't imagine that this tiny weakness could be a real threat to such a large, tightly woven piece.

"It's here," I murmur, and I hear an impressed buzz from the others around me.

"Very good," Maela replies simply. She brandishes the hook like a weapon, and I see the dare in her eyes. She must know this ripping is unnecessary—possibly dangerous—but it's clear I'm being tested at a more advanced level.

"No need." I remove my hand from the spot. "It's no danger to such a beautifully woven piece."

"That's not really a determination for you to make, Adelice," she hisses, and she holds the hook out farther.

"Removing it would risk all the surrounding threads. It's not necessary." I lift my chin and meet her eyes, daring her to defy my proclamation.

"Adelice, I won't tell you again. You put us all in danger when you don't do your part," she says, as though she's instructing me on simple addition and subtraction.

"And I'm telling you there is no risk," I reiterate, my heart beginning to race. "In fact, it would be more dangerous to remove it."

"Is that so?" She seems genuinely interested in my opinion, but I know it's just a show. "In that case …"

Her motion is so swift, I don't see it coming. She wields the hook like a razor, slashing across the piece and brashly ripping an entire section out. Hundreds of shimmering threads hang off the hook, and she beckons for the burly officer.

"Take these—and the others—to storage, and inform the Spinster on duty that we need an emergency patch." She hands the hook to him nonchalantly. No one else speaks; we only stare.

I try to bite my tongue, but the flood of hot anger rising up my body and into my cheeks prevents it. "That was unnecessary."

"I told you that even one weak thread was a danger." Maela frowns and shakes her head in a gesture meant to convey sympathy. Or perhaps remorse. Neither is believable.

“Do you want to be responsible for a tragedy?” she asks me, her gaze traveling around the room. The question is rhetorical, but several of the girls shake their heads.

“If we fail to do our job, we compromise everything that’s been built,” she continues, and as she stares me down, she turns a tiny knob on the side of the loom. The weave before us, mangled and torn open, begins to shift into clearer focus. At first it looks like a piece of cloth, intricately woven, stretching across the machine, but as she zooms in and adjusts the visual it becomes a town. It’s as though I’m looking at a map with a hole in it, and then she clicks the wheel another notch and it becomes a street view. A perfect tree-lined lane, much like the one at home, leading up to a building, an academy. There is the arch of a doorway and the brick façade of the entrance and then nothing. The rest of the building is gone, simply ripped away, leaving bits of bricks tumbling and disappearing into an abyss. It just isn’t there anymore.

I haven’t been able to grasp what she’s done until now. Seeing the weave in tapestry form couldn’t call up the anger this image did. This for a lesson? And what have we learned? That Maela is a psycho. Sure, I could have guessed that. Is this why they need cleaning technology, to sweep away the actions of people like her? Is she who we need to forget?

She keeps her violet eyes on me, until the hint of a smile flits across her face. She doesn’t allow it to settle there long enough for anyone but me to notice. “I think we’re done for today.”

I glance back at Pryana, who may be my friend now. I’ve saved *her* at least, if only for the moment. Her face says it all—she’s not ready for this. As eager as she was to become a Spinster, it’s clear she didn’t expect this. But if I’m being honest, I didn’t either.

“Pryana, you are excused,” Maela says. “In light of the situation, it wouldn’t be fair.”

Pryana’s coffee eyes echo the alarm I feel.

“I’m so sorry for your loss,” Maela simpers, squeezing Pryana’s shoulder.

“What loss?” The girl’s voice is so low, Maela looks at her like she can’t hear.

I speak up instead, my mouth dry. “She asked, what loss?”

“Unfortunately”—Maela lingers on the word—“this piece is from the academy in Cypress.”

Pryana gasps as her eyes dart to the spot, trying to read the brilliant web.

“I can’t imagine much of it is left.” Maela offers an apologetic look and then turns to whisper to Erik.

“My sister attends the academy in Cypress,” Pryana says quietly.

Everyone is watching her now, but her eyes stay fixed on the mutilated piece. A few of the other girls glance over at me. When Pryana lifts her eyes, she looks directly at me.

“You killed her.”

I’m fairly positive Maela expects *her* to kill *me*. I’m certainly bracing for it when a pair of firm hands grip my arms. Erik is pulling me away to safety.

SIX

WE WALK SWIFTLY until we reach the stone hallway I was led from only yesterday. There Erik slows and loosens his grip on me. I look up to catch him grinning at me. He's all business in his dark, trim suit, carefully shaved and groomed. Only his wild blond hair and lopsided smirk betray his professionalism. He's younger than I thought. In total fairness, I've been half-drugged or half-starved during our previous meetings. Still, I can't help wondering if he's as dangerous as his boss.

"Did I miss a joke?" I ask.

"Oh, you were there," Erik assures me, still grinning. "You sure know how to get under Maela's skin. I've never seen her lose it like that."

"You have a strange sense of humor." I think back to Maela's perfect calm, broken by a single, disastrous moment of fury. But perhaps even then she was in control, her anger precise in its purpose, turning Pryana against me.

"Why didn't you do it?" he asks.

"It wasn't necessary. That thread was strong," I answer without hesitation.

"But the Guild has a purpose in asking for its removal," Erik argues, dropping my arm altogether.

"Do they?" I ask, and then wish I hadn't. I'm sure that everything I say to him will be reported straight back to Maela, especially if it sounds like I'm questioning things. But if he's got a response to my skepticism, he doesn't share it.

We stop at a towering oak door, and he jostles it open.

"Do you want the penny tour?" he offers, his blue eyes twinkling a bit.

I take a look around the empty stone cell and shake my head. "I've been here before, but thanks anyway."

"Well, I'll check on you later," he says, stepping back into the hall.

"I can't wait."

"I know." Erik shoots me a wink as he pulls the large door closed.

The first thing I notice is the toilet. I must have done something to deserve this slight improvement in my imprisonment, but I'm not sure what. Regardless, it's small comfort. I know now I'll die here. Maybe not in this cell, but somewhere in the Coventry. It should bother me more than it does. But rather than focus on my own fate, here in the dark, I think of my mother and Amie. Here in this cell without the blinding lamps and overbearing color of the compound, I can sketch them in my mind. The way my mother chewed her lipstick off when she was concentrating. Or how Amie would tell me, down to the color of their socks, what every girl in her class wore to academy and who got in trouble for talking during quiet hour. The blackness lets me imagine we're back in my room, giggling at how Yuna Landew got called out of class to be interrogated about her purity. Of course, that part doesn't seem so funny to me anymore.

Now that I know how far the Guild will go to prove a point, I wonder what really happened to Yuna. Maybe she played dumb better than I can. I should have known Maela's little test wasn't aimed at weeding out the weak girls so much as testing my loyalty. Hundreds are dead because of me. And who have I "saved"? An elderly teacher or a terminally ill child?

Just as I'm sinking into total hopelessness, the door to my cell creaks open. I start when I realize that it's the strange boy with the disappointed eyes, bringing my meal.

"Miss me that much?" he teases, setting the tray down near me. I've been huddling in a corner that feels warmer than the rest of the cell.

"Don't flatter yourself. I have a fetish for cold prison floors."

"Fetish? Big word." He raises one eyebrow at me, challenging me to explain how a pure Eligible knows a word like that.

I want to tell him that unlike the other simpering idiots here I've actually read a book or two in my life, but no matter how much it might impress him, I keep the information locked in my head and glare up at him. It's not a very impressive glare, because something about the smirk he's trying to hide at my wounded expression makes me feel silly and excited and happy all at the same time.

To my surprise, he crosses the cell and drops down beside me.

"Thought I warned you to play dumb," he says with a lowered voice.

“Guess I didn’t listen,” I retort with a shrug.

“You’ll get yourself killed.” He sounds resigned as though he knows I don’t care anymore.

“I’m dead already. We all are.”

“Death is peaceful,” he growls. “This half-life is worse.”

He’s less grimy than before but still unshaved and rough, and he hasn’t bothered to tie back his curly brown hair. He’s nothing like my dad or my friends’ fathers or even the guards here at the compound. It’s this coarseness that sets him apart from the well-groomed men of Arras I know. But it’s the penetrating way he watches me that makes me catch my breath when our eyes meet.

“You’re a lot cleaner than the last time I saw you,” I point out, and immediately wish I could take it back.

“I don’t waste my time on manicures like some men,” he says lightly.

I assume he’s taking a shot at Erik, but then again my dad kept his nails clean, too.

“So you don’t shave. You don’t get manicures. What do you do?”

“I keep this place running,” he says, as though that’s enough of an answer.

“And?” I push.

“Technically I’m the head valet, which means I communicate between the staff and the Spinsters. I make sure things run smoothly. I got the call that you were to be taken to the salons and thought I’d check you out.”

I bite my lip and nod.

“What?” he asks. “Oh, I guess I was pretty unkempt when we met, even for me. I had been gardening. It’s the one thing I do just for me. I like the feeling of soil. It’s honest labor.”

“My grandmother gardened,” I say. “A long time ago, before you had to have a permit. She said the same thing.”

“Stupid Guild,” he says. “I bet she missed it. I’m lucky I can bend the rules here. Everyone is too busy controlling the outside world to care.”

“How come you aren’t dead?” I ask. “Or at least stuck in a cell? I haven’t heard a word from you yet that isn’t treasonous.”

“Unlike you I pay attention to who I’m talking to. I have a special traitor filter I use around others.” He gives me a tired smile that belongs to someone much older.

“So why me?”

“’Cause you ran,” he responds simply.

“I can’t be the first Eligible who ever ran.” I shake my head at the impossibility that no one else has ever tried to escape the Coventry.

“No, but you’re special.”

“Yeah, what makes me different? Or do you talk treason to all the flighty girls?” I realize that I’m flirting with him, and I’m surprised at how comfortable it feels.

“They didn’t kill you.” The playful mood dissipates immediately. It’s clear that he’s not joking.

“Well, I guess it’s good to be different,” I mutter.

Neither of us laughs.

“Why?” I ask after a moment.

“I’m sorry?”

“Why not kill me? I ran. My parents tried to hide me. Why leave me alive?” I ask earnestly, and he turns away.

“I have my theories.”

“And they are?” I press.

“I’m not sure you’re ready to hear them yet.”

“That’s sort of condescending. Telling me only what you think I’m ready to hear,” I point out, annoyed as much by it as by his lack of transparency.

“I thought it was endearing, me looking out for you.” He grins, and the mood in the dark cell lightens again.

“Are you trying to endear yourself to me?”

“I have a thing for traitors.”

“How do you know I’m a traitor anyway?” I ask. “Maybe everyone is wasting their time worrying about me.”

“You’re in the cells for the second time in a week and you’re still alive.” He squints against the dark as if to get a clearer look at my face. “Either Maela is breaking in her new pet, or you’ve got something they want.”

“Like an attitude?”

“Maela is all stocked up on that.” He snorts. “If you could lie low and not draw so much attention to yourself, we might actually be able to find out, Adelice.”

“See, that’s our problem,” I point out.

“What? Your inability to keep a low profile?” he asks.

“No, the fact that I don’t even know your name. How am I supposed to trust you?”

“Josten.” He smiles all the way up through his eyes. “But traitors call me Jost.”

“Nice to meet you, Jost.” I stretch out a hand and immediately regret it because the change in position makes me shiver.

“Here.” He shrugs off a simple, threadbare jacket and wraps it around me. “Unfortunately, I’ll have to take that when I go. It wouldn’t do for anyone to see me giving gifts to the prisoners. It might detract from *my* low profile.”

The jacket is soft and smells like smoke and cut lavender. I nod, grateful for its warmth if only for a few moments.

“You shouldn’t be here,” I say. “They’re probably watching me.”

“The good news is that they don’t bother to keep an eye on the cells. Poor light, stone walls—what’s the point?” He gestures around us. “The bad news is that you’re right. They’re definitely keeping tabs on you.”

“So why are you here then? What help can I be to you if I’m already under suspicion?”

“That’s true, but no one comes down here, so it’s easy enough for us to chat if you keep getting thrown in the cell,” he points out.

“Of course,” I agree. “But that won’t really help me lie low now, will it?”

“Yep, it’s a no-win situation,” he says. “I’m actually only here today because Erik had lapdog duties.”

“Erik sent you?”

“The pretty blond that just threw you in here.”

“I know who he is, and he is pretty, but why send you now?”

“It’s my job to keep the Spinsters happy and fed, so pretty boy sent me. Sorry to disappoint you, but please tell me you have better taste than him.”

“I’m not marrying him. He’s just well-groomed,” I assure Jost. “But lapdogs usually are.”

“Case in point.” Jost fingers the hem of my tailored skirt.

“I think I’m failing at being a lapdog.”

“Yes, you are,” he says. “So I’ll remind you of my first advice: play dumb.”

“That’s easier said than done.”

“Ob-vi-ous-ly.” He stretches out the word. “But it’s important if you want to live. Maela may have a use for you, but she’s not sentimental enough to keep you around indefinitely.”

“Why?”

“You’re going to have to trust me for a bit on that.”

“As long as your reasons are as vague and menacing as theirs are,” I mutter.

“Ouch.” Jost frowns. “I may not tell you everything, but my interests are in line with your own.”

He straightens back up, and I shrug the jacket off and hand it to him. “Thank you.”

“It was nothing.” He waves my thanks away as he puts his jacket on.

“Not for the jacket.” I struggle to put into words how I feel. “For the company.”

“Also nothing. Take my advice, Ad.” This time the cockiness is gone and the nickname wraps around me like his jacket—soft and comfortable. I feel warmer. “They’ll let you go soon. Try to stay out of trouble.”

Jost leaves me in the darkness, and I continue to wait, turning over his words in my mind. He’s being too honest with me. Either he knows something that makes him trust me more than he should, or … I stop myself there. I don’t want to consider his other possible motive.

Knowing they aren’t watching me here relaxes me. I fiddle with the time around me. If only there was a spot of heat in this room, I could weave warmth, or maybe even light.

The food at my feet is stale and cold. A tough bit of bread and thin soup. It’s food to keep me alive and not much more. I could weave and stretch it, but I have to work with the materials I have, and more of this food wouldn’t be much of an upgrade. Then I remember promising my parents that I would never stretch food again, and I falter.

It wasn’t like I did anything wrong. I was only nine years old, and I didn’t know what I was doing. I guess I thought I was helping. Each month my mother allotted a small portion of our rations to sweets. It never went very far, and then one month, the co-op had no sweets

available. Mom explained that there was a shortage of sugar supplies and put the few bits of chocolate from the previous month in the highest cabinet, with the admonishment that we'd save them for my father's birthday. It's not that I didn't want to save the chocolate for Dad. It was that I couldn't let Amie get in trouble.

Ever since I'd discovered I could touch the weave in our yard, I'd studied it, although I'd rarely touched it. But when Amie came home from academy crying because she'd taken some of the chocolate to class and been caught with it, I decided I had to do something.

Most days Amie and I walked home from academy together, but that day I had been kept behind after class was dismissed. I'd been daydreaming, which my teacher said was pointless.

"What will your boss think if he catches you staring at the sky instead of doing your work?" she had asked in a cold voice.

I kept my eyes trained on the floor as she berated me, and by the time it was over, anger and humiliation burned in my chest. And then to make it even worse, Amie hadn't waited for me to walk home.

By the time I got to our house, I'd focused my rage on Amie for leaving me behind. I was so mad that I didn't notice how her lower lip trembled at first. But when she saw me she burst into tears, and my anger dissipated.

"What happened?" I asked her quietly.

Amie shook her head.

"You can tell me anything," I pushed.

Amie hesitated for a moment, but then began telling me about her day. Between her sobs, I pieced together what had happened. One of her friends had demanded that they each bring a piece of chocolate to academy that day. It was a game to see who would have the biggest piece, and poor Amie knew Mom wouldn't give her any. So she took it instead.

"I wasn't going to eat it," Amie told me. "I was going to show it to them, and bring it home. I didn't want to be left out."

"It's okay, Ames," I said, giving her a hug. "Go wash your face, and I'll see if I can find some."

She turned the full force of her pale green eyes on me then, and I saw the tears glistening.

“But I looked. There’s only a tiny piece left,” she whispered.

“Don’t worry about that,” I said with a shrug. “I know a secret. Go wash up.”

Amie looked at me doubtfully, but she did as she was told.

When I was sure she was in the bathroom, I climbed onto the slick wooden counter in our kitchen and pulled down the last bit of chocolate. I didn’t want her to *see* me trying to touch the chocolate’s weave. I was still stretching out the strands of the chocolate to make more of it when my mom walked in from work.

“What are you doing on my kitchen counter?” she demanded. “And you’re filthy, too. Were you …” The words dropped off her tongue when she saw what was in my hand.

“That’s your father’s chocolate,” she said softly.

“I didn’t waste any of it,” I said, showing her the pieces. There was at least twice as much chocolate as there had been earlier.

“Go to your room,” she ordered.

I left the pieces on the counter and stalked away. I didn’t tell them what Amie had done. Instead I let them believe I had eaten the chocolate. And as punishment, I was sent to my room, where I waited until my parents came in later that evening. Amie was probably still too scared to talk to them, so she stayed in the living room watching the Stream.

“Do you understand why what you did was wrong?” my father asked as he sat down next to me on the edge of the bed. My mother stayed by the door.

I nodded my head but wouldn’t meet his eyes.

“Why was it wrong?” he asked.

I gritted my teeth for a moment before I answered. I knew the answer. I’d learned it at academy for years. “Because it wouldn’t be fair for us to have more.”

I heard a strange gasp from my mom, as if someone had physically hurt her, and I looked up to see her regarding me with tired eyes. She turned away from me to look at Amie in the next room.

“Yes, that’s part of it,” he said slowly. “But, Adelice, it’s also dangerous.”

“To eat too much chocolate?” I asked, confused.

He smiled a little at my answer, but it was my mother who spoke.

“It’s dangerous to use your gift,” she said. “Promise us that you’ll never do that again.”

There was a raspy quality to her words, and I realized she’d been crying.

“I promise,” I whispered.

“Good,” she said. “Because I swear I’ll cut off your hands before I let you do it again.”

Even now, as I nibble at the stale bread, the threat echoes in my ears, warning me to keep my skills hidden. So what if the Guild already knows what I can do? I can’t betray my parents again.

*

The next day, when someone finally comes to see me, it’s not Erik or Josten, but Maela herself. She saunters into my cell in a long black gown, holding a lit cigarette. Light streams in from the hallway and outlines her sculpted silhouette. It’s how I imagine death will come to me: overdressed and smoking.

“Adelice, I trust you find your accommodations lacking,” she purrs.

“I’ve definitely seen better,” I say.

“Two nights ago,” she reminds me, puffing thoughtfully on the brass cigarette holder. “You are a peculiar case.”

I remember what Jost said about them killing the other girls. I’m a *peculiar* case because I’m breathing.

“I thought you might like to see this,” she says, showing me a small digifile. Maela sweeps her fingers along it and the screen glows, displaying a series of numbers and charts.

“This is what insubordination causes,” she murmurs, sounding amused with her little toy, and I realize with horror that she’s showing me the number of people killed during the test.

“Insubordination,” I say softly, “had nothing to do with it.”

“When I tell you to remove a weak thread, you do it,” she snarls, dropping her charade of calm amusement.

“Or you’ll murder people?” I don’t disguise the hate in my voice.

“Examples,” she starts slowly, evidently intent on keeping her composure, “are necessary to show the importance of our work. You can

play the victim, Adelice, but you are as culpable as I am. When you cannot make the difficult decision for the good of others, you jeopardize everyone."

"It wasn't a coincidence that Pryana's sister was in that piece," I accuse her, but she ignores me.

"It seems you won't learn your lesson," she says between drags.

"Maybe I'm not the only one."

Maela smiles, and it's a real smile this time, not the dazzling show smile she puts on for the others or the wicked grin she seems to save for me. This smile shows all the flaws carefully covered by cosmetics—the lines, the too-noticeable gum line. It's a hideous sight.

Her face fades back into practiced calm. "I'm willing to give you another chance. I'm not usually so forgiving."

I picture the other girls, killed for less. Had they wasted away in cells or been ripped out and destroyed?

"What happens?" I ask, thinking of the shimmering threads hanging off the hook.

"What happens when what?"

"When you remove strands. Where do they go?"

She smiles again, but it is one of polished venom, not actual mirth. "Perhaps you can go to your training classes and find out, instead of wasting away in a cell."

She leaves me here to ponder this, but deep down I know that they aren't going to answer the kinds of questions I want to ask. Enora had genuinely not known the answer when I asked her the same question during our first meeting. But why hide what really happens if ripping is such an integral part of our jobs?

Unless the ripped could be saved.

SEVEN

I TASTE IRON and my lip stings from where it split open against my teeth. So much for a low profile—not with Pryana in my training group. Maela officially released me a few days ago, shortly after our little chat, and even though I spent considerable time thinking of the right way to approach going back to training, I was still at square one. I'd planned to apologize, but the words never came. The other Eligibles seemed as cold as Pryana, clearly not impressed by my showdown with Maela. The looks they were giving me were pretty easy to read. In fact, they reminded me a lot of how the girls at testing had treated me. They thought I was awkward and incapable. And maybe they were right. Regardless, I found myself shuffling into the studio for our loom instructions without saying a word to Pryana. It probably wouldn't have mattered anyway. It was obvious that she laid the blame for her sister's death at my feet. I was a much easier target than Maela—and a much less dangerous one.

We were finally working on real looms again. After that first disastrous experience, we'd each been given three days of practice with an artificial weave before they allowed us to work on a real piece. The fake weave had felt lifeless under my fingers, but it was easy enough to work with. By the end of the first practice session I had proven my ability to alter easily enough. But, as if I needed another way to alienate myself, most of the other girls hadn't. They were passable as Spinsters, but their work was sloppy or they took too long or they lacked the confidence to really dig into their tasks. By the end of the practice days, we all were cleared to try simple tasks like food weaving, but Pryana and I found ourselves singled out. We were both working on weather instead of food. I'd hoped this would give me a chance to talk with her.

I knew she'd be upset but I hadn't expected her to come right out and hit me. I'm weak after several days in the cell and very little edible food and water, so Pryana's blow knocks me on my butt. I'd like to think it's because I was caught off guard, but I've never had an occasion to test my

fighting skills. I can't blame her for being angry. I wish I could slug someone for what the Guild did to my family.

"I promise you," Pryana says, leaning over so her breath is hot on my face, "your life will be torture as long as I'm around."

"Fair enough," I splutter against the blood pooling along my gums.

She doesn't like my answer. I can tell because her eyes narrow into slits. The whole situation is ridiculous. A feud entirely of Maela's making. I meant well when I stepped forward to take Pryana's place at the testing, and there was no way for me to know it was a piece containing her sister's strand.

This won't stop her from hating me.

Pryana settles back onto her stool and resumes her work, weaving furiously. It should make me mad, or at least indignant, but I think of Amie and how her fine blond hair waves around her ears. It's my fault what happened to them—to both our sisters. I started it all.

Our instructor, an overeager older Spinster who should not be wearing so many cosmetics, doesn't notice any of this. She's busy flitting from Eligible to Eligible, guiding their work and offering encouragement. She's an excellent teacher. I feel a pang and wonder how many teachers were named on assignment day in Romen. Not me. I return to the task of weaving a short rainfall over the northeastern region of our sector.

My loom is larger than the other girls' and its gears and tubes take up an entire corner in the room. It's a much newer loom, usually reserved for the instructor to demonstrate on while the rest of the class practices. The other looms in the room are small, some even rusted, but all in working order. They are pressed so close together the other Eligibles can hardly move to work. Pryana works on one of them. Add that to her list of reasons to hate me. I sigh, thinking how long that list is getting, and how impossible it will be to get back in her good graces. But I can't let myself get distracted when I'm doing something that requires this much of my attention.

Weather is trickier than food, because the strands that compose rain or snow have to be knit into the ones that make up clouds, which are in the sky strands.

Rations are a simple alteration task. The raw material is available and woven into the supply chain to the farmers and store owners. Livestock

and plants can be raised and tended by men, providing valuable roles for citizens, so all we have to do is weave the raw material onto new farms and then remove the crops for even distribution throughout the rest of Arras. It's basic weaving—take a strand out, relocate it in a new piece, weave a new strand into the old piece to grow. Thus crops are farmed and food gets from farm to market. But it's mind-numbingly boring work. Apparently over one thousand Spinsters in Arras's four coventries do this day and night. Two hundred are stationed here, and I hope I don't get assigned to the task. I bet Maela would love to stick me at a station doing simple addition and location for hours every day.

At least the weather gives me room to experiment. Our raw materials come from sources gathered and managed in the various sectors, a process they haven't really explained to us except to flash some pictures of mammoth drills and large factories that separate and organize the strands. I take the material—slate fibers for the rain clouds, brilliant gold lightning thread—and weave them together. Then I insert them into the designated locations called up on my loom. It's a gradual process, carefully adding the elements so that the storm arrives at the predetermined time, when citizens expect it. The teacher warned me how angry people can get if they are caught in a storm moving in too quickly or slowly. Too many mistakes and you're demoted to something like the food-supply chain. The bands of time, which never stop moving across the loom, slowly eat away the threads we add. I use stock matter to replace them as quickly and precisely as I can. Otherwise there'll be a dark-out in the area I'm working on. This happened once when I was younger, and my parents dragged us to the cellar to wait it out. It wasn't dangerous, but when you're seven, seeing the sky disappear is pretty scary. I had nightmares for weeks.

I love the feeling of the weather threads in my hands, and being able to work with a loom is much less tiring than weaving with my hands. No one else here seems to have the skill to work without a loom, and I'm more than happy to keep using the machine. The rain clouds swell against my fingers as I add them into the skyline, and the lightning bolts tingle across the tips. Somewhere in the northeast, it's flashing across the horizon, warning of the impending downpour in case anyone missed the Stream weather schedule. I want to hate the work, but creating the rain is

relaxing, fulfilling even. The tapestry is beautiful—a shimmering, shifting web of light and color.

“Adelice.” My instructor beckons me to join her in a far corner. A few of my classmates notice but quickly return to their assigned tests. No doubt they expect I’m in trouble again.

But it isn’t just her waiting in the corner. Pryana is with her, and she’s not happy to see me.

“I’ve been asked to send you two with the gentleman in the hallway,” the instructor tells us in a lowered voice, so the others won’t hear.

Pryana casts a terrified glance at me, and I know we’re thinking the same thing: Are we in trouble for fighting? Well, more her hitting me and me standing there taking it, but same principle.

“You aren’t in trouble,” the instructor assures us. She must see the fear on both our faces. “You’re moving on: you are Spinsters now.”

To my surprise, this news brings a feeling of relief. I’m eager to learn more about what happens here at the Coventry. Of course, the drawback is that I’m moving on with Pryana. Regardless of what Jost believes about Maela’s desire to keep me alive, I know both she and Pryana will be hoping to watch me fail.

Outside the training room, Erik is waiting. Today he’s dressed in a dark blue suit with subtle stripes intricately woven into the wool. It’s amazing how less than a week of experience with weaving draws my attention to things I never noticed before. How fine the cloth is and how expertly it hugs his body, tailored to fit him precisely. He clears his throat, and I shift my eyes quickly to the floor.

“I have the honor of escorting you both to your evaluation. You will be assigned to a novice studio from there, and you will meet with your mentors to discuss what changes to expect.” His tone is clipped and impersonal. He’s given this speech before, probably dozens of times. So when Maela is busy, I can count on Erik being around.

“Pryana, your personal belongings are being taken to your new quarters in the lower tower.”

“Personal belongings?” I blurt out before I can stop myself.

They both turn and look at me. Pryana understands first, and her face twists into a look of malicious amusement.

“Of course,” she simpers. “We could bring items that mean something to us. Clothing, pictures of our families.”

Her delight goes flat at the last word and pain flits across her face. I wonder if anyone from the Coventry bothered to find out if her sister died, but I’m pretty sure the answer is yes.

“You don’t get personal items when you run,” she continues, eyes flashing.

“I guess not.” I step closer to Erik and farther from her.

“It’s like you never even existed.”

“At least I’m not caught up blaming the wrong person,” I say, the words slipping out of my mouth before I can swallow them down.

Her nostrils flare, but she composes herself quickly. “What? You think because I didn’t rip that day I’m inferior to you?”

“I think you didn’t rip because you’re scared and you’re taking out your anger at yourself and the Guild on me.”

“That’s where you’re wrong,” Pryana growls. “We were only there because of you. Don’t try to deny it. You can believe anything you want, but the truth is that the whole thing was your fault. Maela was testing you. You failed.”

She’s got me there, and I can’t think of a thing to say in response.

“Adelice.” Erik steps in like he’s missed the entire argument. “You’ll stay in your previously assigned quarters.”

I focus on the fact that I don’t have to leave my comfortable new room. Screw Pryana and her personal belongings.

“Since we’ll be seeing much more of each other,” he continues, taking Pryana’s hand, “please call me Erik.”

“More of each other?” Something about this news sends a tingle down my neck.

He looks equally pleased with this announcement. “Although you are being moved into the Spinsters’ quarters, you’re still under observation. During the next few months, you’ll be evaluated and assigned a more permanent position.”

“Will the others be joining us?” Pryana jumps in, asking exactly what I’m thinking. I’m reminded of the one afternoon we were friends.

“We will keep the others under evaluation until we’re certain there are no more Spinsters in the group. Some might end up doing the basic food

weaving, but they'll probably never get any further."

No more Spinsters? I can't believe that they can weed us out so quickly. Will the others be sent to make clothing or work in the kitchen? I'm glad I won't be there when the perpetual excitement drains from their faces. They left home expecting a glamorous life, not a life of tailoring and cleaning. And yet I'm grateful they weren't chosen. Anyone who would treat joining the Coventry with as much passion as those girls doesn't need to be part of the Guild. Eager girls want to please people like Maela.

"You know, Erik," Pryana purrs, crushing against him, "we've all been wondering why Adelice has a room in the high tower."

His response is so well rehearsed, I can almost see the time stand still. "Maela has a reason for her actions."

He must say that a lot. It seems to appease Pryana. Or maybe she's smart enough to stop asking questions.

"Pryana, you will be meeting your mentor here." Erik opens a large metal door and quickly withdraws her arm from his. Too quickly. Pryana notices and skulks inside.

"We aren't training together?" I ask as innocently as possible, as Erik shuts the door.

"No." He grins. "You're off the hook for once."

I try to keep up my wide-eyed act, but it crumbles easily. "Thank Arras."

"I'll pretend I didn't hear that." Erik laughs and offers his arm.

I slide my own through, feeling a little awkward. I've never walked with a man like this. "So, can I ask you something?" I try to sound nonchalant, but it comes out too rushed.

"Of course," he says airily, and I'm struck by how casual he is when he's away from Maela.

"How did you wind up here?"

"That's a long story." He sighs.

"I'm betting most of us have long stories."

"You'd be right," he agrees. "I sort of ran away from home, and now there's nothing to go back to. I was only fifteen at the time, but the Guild took me in when it became evident I possessed certain necessary qualifications that Maela needed in an assistant."

“Necessary qualifications?”

“I have what can best be described as flexible morals.” He turns the full force of his crooked smile on and slows his pace.

“Did your parents die?”

A shadow of a frown flits over his face and he nods. Although he quickly changes the topic. “Did Josten take good care of you the other day?”

For a moment the question paralyzes me, but then I remember that Erik had sent him to check in on me, so I say yes.

“I’m sorry I couldn’t return but I had some pressing duties. Maela can have quite a temper, especially when she’s been challenged.”

“I noticed.”

“I don’t want to throw you back in the cell again, Adelice, so if you could be a little more …”

“Amiable?” I offer.

“Obedient,” he corrects, and I wince at the term.

“I know as well as anybody how unfair she can be, but she’s running the show, so take my advice.” There’s a plea in his voice, and it runs all the way up to his sparkling eyes.

Enora is waiting for me in a large, airy room. On one side windows overlook the enclosed courtyard. I think they’re actually real, and I long to reach through and feel the air. The others look out onto the sea. It’s calm today, a perfect mirror of the cloudless sky. These screens were probably programmed to make me feel tranquil, and perhaps less defensive. Against the wall screens overlooking the sea, a small steel loom sits.

“How are you feeling today?” she asks as we enter. I smile. I suspect that my mentor may only be a few years older than myself, but she fawns over me like a mother hen.

“Great,” I respond simply, wondering if she sees the fat lip Pryana gave me.

“Enora, can you take her back to her quarters when you’re finished? Or would you like me to return?” Erik asks from the doorway.

“I can manage it,” Enora says graciously. “Thank you for your assistance.”

Despite how much I like her, I feel disappointed that I won't be seeing him again today. "Yes, thank you, Erik."

"It was my distinct pleasure." He bows his head slightly and then he's gone.

"He's a bit of a charmer," Enora warns.

I roll my eyes. "I couldn't tell."

"It's none of my business, but … Oh, never mind." She leans in and tugs at my fitted jacket. "We have more important things to worry about."

"Have we run out of mascara?" I ask in mock horror.

"As much as I love your particular brand of sarcasm, I'm going to need you to bite your tongue. You've been invited to a special council meeting."

"What council?" I rack my brain trying to remember all the names and departments they've been throwing at us this week, but I can't remember any councils.

"It's a meeting between the chair of the training panel and the Guild's official Coventry Ambassador."

"Cormac?" I ask apprehensively.

"The one and only," she confirms, leading me back into the hallway.

"So Cormac is the entire council?"

"No, Maela sits on it, but she won't be attending."

"Cormac and Maela comprise a council that oversees things here? That explains a lot," I mutter. I can't help thinking of our last meeting, when he made me eat at Nilus Station. He must have known they were going to lock me up without food. I don't know if this makes me like him or hate him.

"Is this because of the thing with Maela?" I ask, dropping my voice so the security monitors won't hear me clearly.

"Officially, no," she whispers. "But of course it is."

"Great," I mutter, wondering what my punishment will be this time, and then one thought stops me in my tracks.

Amie.

My last meeting with Cormac is a bit hazy from the Valpron injection, but if they still have her it might not be me that they punish.

"Adelice." Enora tugs at my arm.

I don't move.

“You aren’t in trouble,” she tells me quietly.

“I’m not?” Considering how much time I’ve spent in the cell, I find this hard to believe.

“Come on.” She pulls again and I allow her to drag me along.

“If I’m not—”

“Maela,” she confirms under her breath.

“For what she did to that academy?”

“For a lot of things.” She frowns at me. “Maela has been overstepping her bounds in the Western Coventry. She wouldn’t even let me down there to see you, and that’s not within her power.”

Then why didn’t you come?

“I thought she was in charge,” I point out.

“You have a lot to learn,” Enora says with an empty laugh. “Now that you are an invited Spinster, you’ll dine with the others and get to know the system here. Believe me, Maela is nowhere near the top of the Guild hierarchy.”

I raise my eyebrows. “Care to explain the Guild then? It seems like things run a bit differently from what they taught us in academy.”

“That’s the truth,” Enora says. “The Guild is comprised mainly of men, as you know, but they use women for a lot of tasks within the government. Spinsters, for instance. But there are other positions—secretaries, nurses, assistants—”

“Like everywhere else in Arras?” I clarify. This information isn’t all that surprising *or* interesting.

“Yes, but they try to keep as much information about what each coventry does a secret. The Guild oversees our work here, places work orders, and steps in to discipline when necessary. Sometimes I think Maela hopes to advance into the Guild ranks, so she can travel around the four sectors, from coventry to coventry.”

“Is that even possible?” I ask.

“I doubt it,” Enora says. “I don’t think the Guild is going to allow a woman into a position of political power. That won’t stop her though, and if I had to lay money on a woman who could rise from under the Guild’s thumb and out of the Coventry, it would be her.”

“Not that I’m a fan of Maela’s ego getting any bigger, but don’t we already have a pretty powerful position?”

“That’s where someone like Cormac comes in,” Enora explains, her soft voice rushing through the information as we walk. We must be getting close to our destination. “Officially, he’s a spokesman who keeps the public apprised of what goes on in the coventries and the work we are doing. People think he’s a friendly goodwill ambassador between the Spinsters and the people.”

“Unofficially?”

“He keeps us in our place. He may not be head minister, but he’s just as powerful. Don’t let him fool you. That’s why he’s here.”

“As thrilling as that information is, why am I being dragged into this?” I ask.

“Good question.” Enora sighs, and I’d bet she’s wondering how she got stuck mentoring the new troublemaker.

“Don’t they tell you anything?” I didn’t mean for this to be an insult, but Enora bites her lip as if it were.

“No, they don’t, Adelice.”

“They don’t tell any of us anything,” I note. “So it’s probably stupid to ask, but did you find out about my sister, Amie, or my mother?” Asking sends a thrill of dread through my stomach.

“I’m sorry,” Enora says, shaking her head. “The one person who might have information has been traveling.”

“Traveling?” I ask in surprise. “Is it a politician?”

“No, it’s one of us,” she says quietly, but I can tell she can’t say any more.

I stop asking questions even though my mind is heavy with them, and she leads me to a large red-lacquered door and knocks timidly. The door flies open.

“Yes?” an officer dressed in the jet-black uniform of the Guild Special Service asks without meeting our eyes.

“It’s fine,” a familiar voice calls from inside the room. “They’re my guests.”

The officer moves to the side, and we step into the lounge. It’s more dimly lit than most of the rooms in the compound. Probably due to the heavy velvet curtains that drape the oversized windows. Enough light streams in that I can make out the plush sofas and slick leather chairs strategically placed around the room, but the lack of natural light leaches

the color from the furniture. Cormac sits by a marble hearth, cigar in one hand and cocktail in the other. He's clad as always in his double-breasted tux, although his bow tie hangs loosely around his unbuttoned collar.

"Miss me?" he asks.

"It hasn't been that long," I remind him.

"I'm sure it's felt like a lifetime," he says, running his eyes down me. "Adelice, you are looking … malnourished."

"Cormac, you're looking overdressed."

"Good," he sneers. "Now the hair matches the attitude."

Beside me Enora fidgets.

"And who are you?" he asks, turning to her and squinting in the dark.

"Enora," she says quietly. "I'm Adelice's mentor."

To her credit she sounds calm.

"Nice to meet you, Enora," he says, taking a swig from his glass. "I'll have Adelice escorted back to her quarters when we're through."

"I'm happy to stay," she tells him.

Cormac chuckles like this is a bold suggestion and shakes his head. "That won't be necessary."

With one worried look, Enora steps back through the door, and I'm left alone in the room with the Guild's official Coventry Ambassador.

"Sit," he commands. "Cocktail?"

I shake my head.

"Whatever." He sets down his glass and, moments later, someone steps from the shadows to refill it.

I feel my breath catch and turn away, hoping Cormac didn't notice my reaction.

"Will you be requiring anything else?" Jost asks him, and I feel heat creeping onto my cheeks. I'm suddenly thankful for the heavy curtains.

"Not at the moment, but stay close just in case," Cormac says in a dismissive tone.

"Happily," Jost murmurs, but our eyes meet as he turns and he's anything but happy. A moment later he's faded back out of sight.

"So you've been causing trouble," Cormac informs me as he swirls his whiskey.

I focus on the soft clink of ice against the glass, and say nothing.

“Maela has overstepped her bounds as usual,” he continues. “Technically, she’s your superior, you know.”

“Technically?” I ask in surprise.

“Do you think we usually let girls who try to tunnel out of their houses live?”

“So why me?”

“Your skills assessment at your testing was off the charts,” he admits, setting his glass down and leaning forward.

“Why are you the only person who tells me anything?” I ask, shifting back in my chair.

“Well, I know more than anyone else.”

“But they know more than they let on,” I press. His cologne’s heavy musk is making my head swim, and I can’t hold back the thoughts I’ve locked in since my arrival.

“They do,” he admits, “but I have so much more power. It’s easier to share little secrets when you’re in charge.”

“And you are?” I ask him pointedly. “Then why tell me? You have no more reason to trust me than they do.”

“No, I don’t,” he says, “but unlike them, I can have you killed.”

“And I thought we were finally becoming friends.”

Cormac laughs a deep, barking cackle. “You are delightful. I do hope I don’t have to kill you.”

“Finally, something we can agree on.”

He reaches out and places his warm hand on my knee. “You could be the most powerful girl here if you start playing your cards right.”

I shift my leg away and cross it over the other.

“I’m here to make sure Maela doesn’t kill you,” he says, straightening back up in his chair, “and you aren’t making that job easy.”

“And if she kills me?”

“We’ll rip her.” There’s not a hint of sadness in his voice.

“Does she know that?”

“I’ve spoken with her,” he assures me. “Of course, it makes her hate you more.”

“Fabulous.”

“You’d be wise to stop trying to piss everyone off and start worrying about yourself.” The amusement is gone from his voice. “I can keep her

from killing you, but until you move out of her control, you're still at her mercy."

"And how do I do that?"

"First, you start doing your job. Then you start making allies."

"Enora already told me to make friends."

"You're going to need more than friends," he says. "Your only chance is to move past Maela's grasp, and to do that you'll need someone with real power here."

"Any suggestions?"

"I have someone in mind."

I feel his eyes travel back to my legs, and I straighten in my chair. Out of the corner of my eye, I see Jost stiffen in the shadows.

"Adelice, you'll be accompanying me on a public-relations tour of Arras this weekend. Your aesthetician and stylist are fully prepped on expectations, and I assume your mentor—"

"Enora," I remind him.

"Yes, her," he says. "She'll inform you of protocol measures."

I swallow hard and nod.

"See? It's easy."

"May I ask you something?"

"More polite every day." He raises one eyebrow, which I assume is a yes.

"Did you find my mother?" With the death threat hanging fresh in the air, now seems like a good time to ask.

"Hold on." Cocking his head to the side to use his complant, he voice-dials a woman named Penny.

"Can you pull the binaries on Lewys Subject Two?"

My eyes drift to Jost again, who's stepped forward into a slant of light. He gives me a tight-lipped smile. I think he's trying to be supportive.

"No, I don't have the personal identifying sequence. It was the mother."

Subject. It. It pains me to hear my mother described this way.

"Thanks, doll." Cormac turns his gaze back to me. "She was found during the cleaning of Romen and removed."

“You ripped her?” The words are thick on my tongue, and I barely push them out.

“Standard procedure and much more humane than how I usually deal with traitors.”

I can still feel the sticky warm blood on my dining room floor. I know exactly how he—and the Guild—usually deals with them.

“You,” he calls to Jost. “Have Maela’s assistant pick her up.”

Jost grunts from the corner and taps the order into the small companel.

“Adelice, one more thing.”

I stare at him, blinking hard against the tears burning up my throat.

“These are Stream events, which I’m sure you know.”

I nod once. Guild events are required viewing in every home. They usually consist of a lot of back-patting and flashes to the beautiful, important visiting politicians. Since the Streams come in automatically, my parents usually let them play while we continued our nightly chores and activities. When we were very young, Amie and I would squeal over the lush satin dresses and sparkling jewels worn by the visiting Spinsters. Now that would be me.

“Remember the deal we made when we first met?”

I tilt my head at Cormac curiously and sift through my recollection of that night. I hate the fuzzy final memories I have of my retrieval and the last time I saw my parents, and if I could remember more from that night, I wouldn’t want it to be memories of Cormac.

“Stupid Valpron.” He tilts his head again and barks: “Penny, the head medic for the Lewys retrieval. Put in a removal request.”

I gasp, and in the corner Jost whips toward us but doesn’t come forward.

“So incompetent,” Cormac tells me, but there’s no anger in his voice. He’s already moved on. His poor secretary probably hates her job.

“I told you I had someone you loved very much and you put on a dazzling show,” he continues.

“Too bad you ripped her,” I say with only the slightest break in my voice.

“No, not your mother,” he says. “Your sister, what was her name?”

“Amie,” I tell him in a small voice.

“She’s been rewoven, and I’m told she is safe and happy.”

“Happy?” I ask doubtfully.

“We did some modifications on her.”

“So you turned her into someone else?”

“She’s in essence the same,” he assures me.

“But you took away her memories of my family. Of me.” I can feel the tears drying up as I struggle with this new information.

“One of our very best Spinsters in the Northern Coventry cleaned her thread,” he says with a patronizing tone.

“What does that even mean?” I explode. “First you alter my town, and now you *cleaned* her thread?”

“It’s a process we’ve been using on deviants for years. If a child shows a predisposition to violence or mischief, we go in and map his or her brain. The method allows us to follow how the individual’s brain processes information, and then we isolate the problem areas and map where the issues occur in the individual strands.”

“So you can see how their minds function and store memories, but how does that change anything?” I ask, looking past him, afraid to meet his eyes.

“We can often replace parts of the thread with artificial or donated thread material. It’s a science we’re still perfecting,” he tells me. “But it’s usually very successful. It’s a lot like the renewal patching that strengthens and refines an individual’s threads. Someday, we’ll be able to completely control both techniques, eradicating behavioral issues and larger problems like aging.”

I shudder at the thought, but I’m not surprised someone like Cormac wants to control aging.

“If Amie’s a completely different person, I’m not sure we have a deal anymore,” I hedge, hoping he’ll reveal more about where she is or what’s happened to her.

“Screen,” he orders, and a burst of color illuminates the swirling marble mantel. “Location service.”

“Clearance?” a pleasant voice prompts from somewhere in the ceiling.

“Cormac Patton.”

“Subject?”

“Lewys Subject Four. Amie?” He looks to me for confirmation, and I nod.

The abstract pattern draws together and blurs, slowly forming the shape of a young girl. Her back is to us as she walks with another girl along a shady, tree-lined lane.

“Visual realign. Face recognition,” Cormac orders.

It’s not necessary. The girl’s hair is pulled up loosely and it curls into soft, golden tendrils at the backs of her ears. I turn from the screen as it flashes an image of Amie, laughing, with her new friend. Happy. My heart cracks along its barely healed lines and falls back to pieces.

“No harm done,” he confirms. “Do I have a date?”

“Do I have a choice?” I manage to ask.

“Of course,” he says. “Although, choose wisely.”

“I’ll see you tomorrow,” I tell him quietly, holding back the tears in my throat. There’s no way he heard me, but he doesn’t ask again. I’m grateful for a knock at the door. I couldn’t handle being alone with Cormac much longer. Erik ducks into the room and strides over to him.

“You’re Maela’s assistant?” Cormac asks smugly, staring at his wild, blond hair.

Erik, to his credit, smiles and extends his hand. “Erik, sir.”

Cormac stands and shakes his hand. Clapping a hand over his shoulder, he turns Erik to face me. “Escort Miss Lewys to her quarters. Oh, and Erik?”

“Yes, sir?”

“Keep your hands to yourself.”

“Of course,” he agrees, without missing a beat.

Letting go of Erik’s shoulder, Cormac turns back to the corner.

“Bring my meal here and order my motocarriage for pickup in an hour,” he orders Jost.

“Sir.” Jost bows and moves across the room to exit. As he passes, he dares a glance at me. Beside me Erik bristles at Jost’s appearance. I hadn’t pegged him for an elitist.

“Miss Lewys?” Erik offers me his arm after Jost has passed.

I make it to the hallway before the tears start.

“Yeah.” Erik pats my hand. “Ambassador Patton has that effect on me too.”

“Sorry,” I whisper, and offer him the smallest smile I can muster.

“Don’t be,” he says. “It’s nice to be around someone who has more than two emotions, and if I have to suffer Maela’s wrath later, I might as well enjoy your company.”

“She’s going to be mad?” I ask between sobs.

“Patton’s a jerk. He sent for me to put Maela in her place—remind her who’s in control. I mean, I’ve met him at least ten times before today.”

“But you were so polite when he forgot your name.”

“Being rude won’t get you anywhere,” Erik says. His tone is conversational, but I’m sure it’s a warning.

He lets me cry for most of our walk back through the halls, and in the brass elevator he hands me a soft linen handkerchief.

“Thanks.”

He nods.

At my door, I offer it back to him.

“Keep it.” He pushes it into my hands. “I have a feeling you’re going to need it more than I am.”

I wish I could tell him he’s wrong.

EIGHT

AS A CHILD I SAT RAPT on the bathroom floor and watched my mother line her eyes with a fine pen and then smooth pink rouge on her cheeks. She was the perfect Western woman—attractive, groomed, and obedient—but she was made more beautiful by her laugh lines and the faint crow's-feet that crinkled as she smiled. Day by day, I am remade into someone else, and I wonder if age will ever leave her tracks on my face. I'm sixteen now, and I will be almost flawless forever. That thought helps me fall asleep at night, secure in my place here, but it also wakes me up trembling with nightmares.

Stockings are the biggest sartorial change in my life. The first time I wore the flimsy hose I loved how the silk caressed my bare legs, but I soon realized that they leave a film of sweat on my skin. The seam is always running crooked up the backs of my legs, and the stockings constantly slipping down. Keeping up my proper appearance has ceased being glamorous, and now that I'm expected to travel with Cormac Patton, it's even worse.

I've spent little to no time at a weaving station since his visit. Instead I've been fitted and measured and trained in etiquette. While it's saving me from actually using my weaving ability, it's also leaving me plenty of time to dwell on the fate of my mother and sister. The image of my father in a body bag is inexorably burned in my mind, and while I see it when I close my eyes to sleep, at least his death is real to me. But my sister's fair hair and my mother's flawless face feature endlessly in my dreams. I obsess over Amie's new life while they pin and tack my new gowns. She would love this—being fitted for fancy dresses. At least *my* Amie would. The idea that she's alive but a completely new person makes me ache like I've been hollowed out and left to stand too long without a core. It's too much to process, so instead I count the dresses I'll need. Dresses for rebounding, dresses for interviews, dresses for pictures. Judging by the amount of silk and tulle filtering into my quarters, I'm not looking forward to wearing any of them.

Enora might as well move into my quarters. I'm expected to know every Guild official, the name of his wife, where he resides, and his sector's primary exports. Arras has a prime minister, and then each sector has a governing minister; every metro has one as well. The roles are granted through bloodlines as long as each man has a male heir. A Guild office can never pass to a woman. It's more information than I learned in ten years at academy, and I can't imagine how I'll ever use it. I'm not much for small talk.

"Will there be a test?" I ask Enora after the third hour of quizzing she's given me on the Eastern Sector.

"Why don't you call and ask Cormac?" she snaps, clearly as tired of this as I am, but too worried to send me off unprepared.

"So how do I address these officials?"

"Address?"

"Yes, what do I call them? Are they considered ministers?" I recall how many of his officers refer to Cormac as Minister Patton instead of Ambassador.

"You shouldn't address them at all." She looks at me like I've lost my mind.

I don't bother to hide my annoyance. "Then why am I learning this?"

She lets out a long, motherly sort of sigh before responding. "As Ambassador Patton's escort, you will be expected to remind him of important names and information."

"Wait a minute." I tug out of the grip of the seamstress who is quietly sewing at my feet and turn to Enora. "Are you telling me I'm learning this so Cormac won't have to?"

"Of course."

"But I shouldn't talk to these people?"

"Only if they address you and only to make very casual conversation."

"Unbelievable." I'm not sure if I'm referring to the expectations or to Enora thinking this is normal.

"That's another thing." Enora hesitates. "You're a bit too comfortable with him. Has Ambassador Patton asked you to call him by his first name?"

"I can't remember. He doesn't seem to mind."

“Adelice,” Enora says quietly. “He usually visits us once or twice a year, and he’s informed our head valet that he’ll be here at least once a week for the next month. Because right now he’s enamored with you.”

“Enamored? Yuck, I just ate.” I don’t care if half of Arras’s female population would run naked into his bed, he’s way too old for me. And I still don’t trust him.

“You amuse him,” she continues, ignoring my comment. “Just remember he’s the one who can sign the execution decree.”

So she knows. I hadn’t bothered to fill her in on the particulars of my meeting with him, and I’d purposefully forgotten to mention his remark about killing me. She worries enough.

“Until he tells you otherwise, call him Ambassador Patton.”

“Fine,” I agree, stepping back onto the stool to allow the seamstress to continue working on my hem.

Enora pauses and draws in a breath, watching my fitting for a moment. “Maela has asked to go over your itinerary with you.”

“That’ll be fun.”

“Behave yourself,” Enora orders me in a disapproving whisper.

A few minutes later, Maela enters my bathroom and gives the gown I’m wearing a critical look. “Interesting choice.”

I pretend I can’t hear her.

“Ambassador Patton’s office has telebounded your official itinerary to me.”

“I’d be happy to go over it with her,” Enora offers.

Maela’s eyes burn, but she laughs at the suggestion. “I think it would be better if someone who has attended an official Guild event outside the compound briefs her. Why don’t you run up to the depository and retrieve suitable adornments for her?”

Enora gives me a sympathetic smile and leaves. Having succeeded in getting rid of Enora, Maela knows I’m at her mercy.

“You’ve been to one of these before?” I ask her.

“You don’t think you’re the first Spinster to catch Cormac’s eye, do you?” Maela asks.

So that’s her hang-up. “I haven’t given it much thought actually.”

Maela turns her attention to her personal digifile. “You will leave here tomorrow at seven in the morning and rebound to the Nilus Station,

where you will have an image shoot with the local Stream crew."

"I came here through Nilus," I tell her, but she ignores me.

"From there, you will rebound to the Allia Station in the Eastern Sector, followed by the Herot Station in the Southern Sector, and the Ostia Station in the Northern Sector."

"That seems like a lot of work," I say, grimacing for emphasis. If I thought this would break the ice between us, I was wrong.

Instead Maela whips around to me and glares. "You don't deserve this. There are dozens of girls here who'd give anything to escort Cormac without acting like some entitled brat."

I'm guessing she's one of them.

Just as quickly as her rage appeared, it evaporates. "At each stop you will participate in an image shoot," she continues. "You will be given a set of appropriate responses to the Stream crew's questions and only speak when you are asked a question directly. Do you understand?"

"Yes." I nod. "See! I did it!" I add with mock enthusiasm.

This time she ignores my jibes. "You will visit with Guild officials at each stop. I assume Enora has gone over expectations."

"Yep." I smile brightly. "Shut up and look pretty."

Maela's head snaps up, her face ripe with disapproval, but she doesn't lecture me again. "The following morning Ambassador Patton will escort you to several image shoots and various scheduled appearances. Your aesthetician crew will rebound behind you."

"All of them?"

"Yes." Maela's face contorts in impatience, showing her age. "As will your personal guard."

"But I don't have a personal guard," I point out.

"Ambassador Patton has reassigned Erik to escort you," she says calmly.

I am acutely aware of the number of scissors scattered around the room.

Maela keeps her eyes on her digifile, probably trying not to stab me. Apparently Erik was right about Cormac wanting to get under her skin.

"Valery will be attending you, of course, and she is bringing an assistant. Cormac has also ordered that Josten Bell serve as his valet."

“Josten Bell?” I keep my face turned down to the seamstress working at my feet.

“He attended you in the cells,” she tells me, studying my face. “Don’t you remember him? He’s our head valet. I thought he’d taken an interest in you.”

“The rude one?” I ask.

“That’s him.”

“Why?” It feels like a trap to send me traveling with two young men, or maybe Cormac’s just really stupid.

“He attends Cormac—excuse me, Ambassador Patton—when he calls on the Western Coventry,” she says, checking her digifile screen. “The ambassador has a fondness for him, or rather for his cocktail-mixing skills, and since his usual valet is unavailable, he took ours. It seems he doesn’t care about our ability to function while you two are traveling.”

“I guess I didn’t think he was anybody important.” I try to keep my tone dismissive and casual, but I’m aware of how fast my heart is beating. Not only has Maela noticed Jost’s attention to me, now he’s being dragged into this mess.

“He’s not,” Maela assures me as she disappears back into my bedroom.

“That’s what I thought,” I murmur to no one in particular.

*

Enora comes to help me pack, and my primary aesthetician, Valery, trails behind her. I’m grateful for the company. I know I’ll never sleep, like the night before Winter Solstice, when all you can think about is presents. But this time it’s fear, not excitement, that’s keeping me awake.

Valery whispers something into Enora’s ear and she squeezes her forearm in response. “Ready for tomorrow?” she asks me, leaning against Enora.

I bite my lip and screw my face into one of panic. Valery laughs, but Enora shakes her head in amused disapproval.

“I’ve been prepping her all day,” Enora says to Valery, but her eyes are on me. “She better be ready.”

“If you prepped her, I’m not worried,” Valery says, giving my mentor’s arm a friendly pat. “But I’d better be ready to do my part.” My aesthetician grins at me and slips into the bathroom. She’ll be sure to have all her tools ready for this trip: the thought sends me spiraling back into dread.

Most of my belongings are being sent along with the crews following me through the rebound stations, but Enora hands me a small red box tied with a satiny white bow. It reminds me of the presents my parents brought into my room on my birthday each year. I never got a chance to enjoy the perfume they bought me on my last one, a gift to celebrate turning sixteen and the promise of my long-awaited dismissal. I ooh and aah as I open Enora’s gift, but I have to fight the hollow ache it prompts in my chest.

It’s a personal digifile.

“For your rebounds,” she tells me as she shows me how it powers on. “I know they can make you sick, so I thought this might distract you. It has all the information you need.”

I gently touch the screen and it offers me a variety of entertainment options: cosmetic and clothing catalogs, Stream vlips, and the latest Guild *Bulletin*.

“Thank you,” I say, genuinely pleased with the gift. Although I’ve seen some people like Maela using them, in Romen only highly ranked businessmen could afford digifiles, and I’ve never seen a woman use one outside the Coventry. It makes me feel important to have one of my own.

“It will also allow you to communicate directly with Ambassador Patton,” Enora says, sliding her finger to select complant compatibility. “He wanted us to fit you with a complant, but Maela threw a fit.”

For the first time I’m grateful for Maela’s jealousy. “He wanted me to have a complant?”

“He’s been pushing for Spinsters to be fitted for years,” she tells me. “He claims it will allow for quicker response to imminent threats to Arras.”

“Is he right?”

“No, we’re prepared with Spinsters on emergency duty at all hours. He’s more interested in keeping tabs on us.”

I try to hide my surprise at her openness. Despite her kindness, Enora rarely speaks so directly with me.

“Why did Maela say no?”

“Don’t worry,” she says, and laughs. “She’s not reconsidering your relationship. She couldn’t get approval from Loricel, so I suggested this.”

“Loricel?” I ask, scanning through the files.

“She’s the only person around here who says no to Cormac.”

I set the digifile down and pay closer attention. “Who is she?”

“She’s the Creweler.”

“Like you?” I ask, recalling Enora’s various duties.

“No, I’m nothing like her,” she admits. “I merely assist her on certain projects.”

“But there’s more than one, right?”

“Not really,” she says, lounging back on a floor cushion. “True Crewelers are very rare. Loricel is the only Creweler in Arras.”

“The only one?” I stop pacing and sit down next to her.

“Crewel work is an act of pure creation. Crewelers do more than weave the fabric of Arras. They can capture the materials to create the weave. Only they can see the weave of the raw materials.” She looks at me pointedly. “It is only through Loricel that Arras survives. The Spinsters wouldn’t have any matter to weave if it weren’t for her special gift.”

“How old is she?” I ask, my stomach dropping. All the years of hiding and lying about my ability to touch the weave without a loom, even here at Enora’s request, make sense now.

“It’s hard to say, with renewal patches and medication,” Enora says lightly. “But she’s been in service for over sixty years.”

She must be ancient. “What happens when she dies?”

“They’ll find a new Creweler.” Enora’s gaze is steady on mine. “But so far there haven’t been any real contenders.”

“And if they can’t find one?” I whisper.

“Arras will fade away.”

I search her face for a sign of sadness or fear but it’s not there. If the possibility of Loricel’s death frightens her, she doesn’t show it. But the image of Amie laughing with her friend floats to my mind, followed by

how Jost's eyes crinkle when he smiles. Without a Creweler, they'll fade away too. It's a possibility I can't even consider.

"Cormac showed me Amie, you know," I say in a quiet voice.

"Your sister?" Enora confirms, and I nod my head.

I haven't spoken of her often since I've been here. My life feels split in two: before and after. Everything that preceded my retrieval is a secret. A past life that has no place here, and although Amie is alive, for me she exists only in that time. I keep her there in my private thoughts, but something about the memories parading through my head as they prep me for travel longs to break free and be acknowledged.

"She was happy," I say, and I hear how my voice almost echoes from the pain. I don't tell Enora that Amie's different now or what's been done to her. Or that my thoughts have turned from memories to plans, and that the real reason I'm going along with this tour is to get out from behind Coventry walls to the world of before, where Amie still exists, even if she's changed.

"I think rebounding will be much more comfortable for you this time," she says, pushing the digifile into my hands and forcing my mind back to the present moment.

The shackles from my first trip flash through my thoughts and set my hands trembling. "I won't be—"

"No," she says in a rush, reading my thoughts. "You will be traveling in first class rebounding chambers. Ambassador Patton wants you kept happy."

"I'm still not sure what I did to deserve this," I admit.

Enora smiles sadly. We're not stupid enough to believe the top-notch privileges I've been receiving have anything to do with me deserving them. "I guess we'll have to wait and see."

*

In the morning, I ride by motocarriage to my rebounding appointment. Erik and Jost come with me, but the rest of my crew follows behind. Erik keeps up a steady stream of chatter, but Jost sits quietly to the side. I laugh with Erik, but I feel the thickness of the air in the back of the

carriage—Jost isn’t happy about being sent all over Arras. And he doesn’t seem thrilled about me chattering away with Erik either.

My scruffy friend has been cleaned up for the event. Jost’s face is closely shaved, and his hair is combed and tucked behind his ears. It brushes the collar of his gray wool jacket.

“How do you two know each other?” I ask Erik, pointing at Jost.

Jost startles out of his malaise and stares at me.

“You said he sent you …” I trail off, not wanting to talk too much about what Jost told me in the cell in case the Guild has installed audio transmitters in our motocarriage.

“Jost is the head valet,” Erik informs me. “When I couldn’t come to your cell, I asked him to attend to you.”

“Okay.” I nod, not sure I believe it’s as simple as that. Jost spoke as though he knew Erik. As if they had a history of some sort, and not a pleasant one.

“Are you nervous about rebounding?” Erik asks, changing topics.

Out of the corner of my eye I spy Jost settling back against his seat, but his eyes remain on me.

“Yes,” I admit, trying to ignore the steady gaze of Jost’s blue eyes. “My first experience wasn’t very pleasant.”

“Well, that was not a typical experience,” Erik tells me.

“I forgot. You were there,” I remember out loud.

He nods. If he’s sorry about ordering the medic to dose me, he doesn’t show it.

“Enora gave me this,” I tell him, producing my digifile from my handbag.

Erik lets out a low whistle. “Fancy gift.”

“Really?” I ask, flushing. “I assumed most Spinsters got one.”

“Nah, Maela has one, but only because she sits on the training panel. Enora pulled some strings for that,” Erik says.

“I had no idea,” I admit.

For a brief second Erik’s eyes flash to Jost’s, but whatever prompted the look, neither speaks. The conversation trails off again and I’m grateful the ride is short, because my stomach is doing cartwheels.

The rebound station that sits outside the compound walls is small and unassuming. Erik escorts me through the double brass doors into a small

lobby with one brushed-velvet chair, which I'm forced to sit in. Behind us, my team, along with my gowns, bags, and carts, filters in, packing the tiny room. A polished woman in a sky-blue suit appears from the hallway and speaks briefly with Erik. I watch as he nods and gestures to the group. A moment later, she strides over and beckons for me to follow her. I walk by her side. Behind us I hear Erik smoothly directing the rest of the group into an ordered line.

"You're rebounding into Nilus?" the woman asks me evenly, and I manage a nod. She's older, with her hair neatly kept in a simple bun, and she guides me with the expertise of someone who's done this her whole life.

"Your rebound will take about an hour," she continues, leading me into a softly lit room and directing me to sit in an overlarge leather seat in the dead center of the chamber. She reaches toward a panel beside me, and I hear the click of a button as she pushes it. I tense, waiting for the metal helmet to lower onto my head, but instead a small oak tray table glides over my lap. I exhale as she fastens a long, thick belt diagonally across me.

"Have you rebounded before?" she asks curiously.

"Yes."

"I'm sorry to ask," she says. "You seem nervous. Most people aren't as scared the second time around."

I shrug weakly, not wanting to tell her I was chained to the chair during my last rebound.

"You'll be fine," she tells me sweetly. "I'll bring you some tea."

She disappears out the door, and Erik's head appears in the doorway. "I'll see you at Nilus."

"See you there," I manage.

He continues past my door and Jost follows him. Our eyes meet for only a moment, but I can't think of anything to say to him. As soon as he's out of my sight, the stewardess reappears with a glass of iced tea.

"Best not to drink anything hot until you're more accustomed to rebounding," she advises, setting it neatly on a square white napkin in front of me.

"Thank you," I tell her sincerely, and she pats my arm as she exits. I feel my chest constrict, the memory of my last stewardess tugging at my

mind.

After the door is shut, the room begins to shimmer, fading in and out around me. This time without the helmet blocking my vision, I'm struck by how beautiful it is. Strands of golden light wind around me, and the rebound chamber gradually dissolves. I relish the few moments when everything is pure time, knit with raw material, as it is seconds before the weave binds together into the new room. I forget about the tea and the digifile I'm clutching in my sweaty palm as the room flickers in and out of my vision and another slowly and gracefully replaces it. I relax back into the chair as the hour passes, noting how each piece of the room is carefully rewoven until I'm in a bright red space decorated with a vibrant pattern painted in gold along its walls. As the last bit of the chamber settles into place, a pretty young girl bounces into the room.

"Welcome to Nilus Station, Miss Lewys," she bubbles, pushing my tray back and undoing my restraint. "The rest of your party will be here shortly. Please rise carefully."

As soon as I start to rise I understand her warning. My legs wobble and shake as though I've been sitting for hours. Clutching the arm of the chair, I force myself upright and take a deep breath.

"It takes a long time to get used to it," she says. "At least that's what most people tell me."

I survey the girl more closely. She can't be much older than me. She was probably assigned here shortly after my retrieval. This could have been my assignment.

"Have you ever rebounded?" I ask her.

"Oh, no." She flushes. Dropping her voice as she helps me off the small platform, she confesses, "My boss told me he's going to rebound me to Allia. The station manager there owes him a favor."

"Well," I say, trying to sound enthusiastic, "the first trip is the hardest."

"I know!" she squeaks. "I'm nervous, but it's a once-in-a-lifetime chance."

Jost is waiting for me in the hall and the young stewardess flashes me a grin as she disappears around the corner. "Nice to see some enthusiasm," he says dryly. "Erik is checking to make sure everything is in order."

“Great.”

I can’t think of anything to say to him, so I press my lips together apologetically. I hate having to pretend he’s beneath me, but I don’t want anyone questioning our familiarity with each other.

“I know,” he whispers.

“I’m sorry.” The understanding look he’s giving me makes me feel worse.

“Hey, I told you to play dumb.”

I nod and vertigo from the rebound sends me reeling forward. Jost catches me easily, and my arms tingle where he touches my bare skin. The sensation travels up my arms and settles in the nape of my neck. I know I should pull away, but before I can, the click of shoes in the hall behind us startles us apart. Jost casually steps back as Erik comes into view.

“Cormac won’t be joining us until Allia,” he tells us. “Something’s come up in the Eastern Sector. Adelice, do you need to use the powder room?”

I shake my head, anxiety twisting my stomach into knots again. I’ve never spoken in public before.

“Don’t worry,” he says, extending the crook of his arm. “The reporters are limited to fifteen minutes. You remember your answers?”

“Yes.”

“You’ll be fine.” His tone is reassuring, but it does nothing to steady my nerves. Erik strikes me as the type who doesn’t ever get nervous.

We exit through the rebound company’s lounge into the station lobby. It’s empty except for strategically placed guards.

“No travel allowed between stations today, except for invited dignitaries, and we’ll have Special Service guards at every stop,” Erik says.

“I’m a dignitary,” I say, willing myself to believe it.

“Hard to believe, right?” he teases, which makes me smile a little.

Jost ambles up beside me, and I realize the two are now flanking me like I’ve seen Erik and Maela’s guard do with Maela. Standing between them, I shift uncomfortably while we wait for the guard at the main entrance to clear us. After a few minutes, the guard motions for us to continue.

Without the usual foot traffic of businessmen, the grand marble hall of the station is quiet, the only noise coming from a small group of Stream reporters. As soon as they spot us, they snap to life and swarm around. The guards keep them at a safe distance, and I'm glad to have Erik and Jost standing by me, but when Erik steps forward to speak, the guards are the only buffer between me and the vlip recorders.

"I've been assured you've received your assigned interview questions and placements. You have fifteen minutes to get your footage before Miss Lewys's next rebound."

The group organizes itself quickly and I'm met with the questions Enora prepped me for yesterday.

"Miss Lewys, what is your favorite privilege as the newest invited Spinster?" a boyish reporter asks me in a clipped, businesslike tone as a vlip operator looms over his shoulder.

"The clothing," I respond automatically. I try to sound casual, but I know my words are being broadcast on live feed across Arras as part of the promotional tour. "It's so nice to have pretty things to wear every day."

"Bit of a change from the old purity standards?" another rosy-cheeked reporter breaks in jovially, and a few others laugh, but a guard pushes him back and the group returns to the business at hand. It's enough to loosen me up though.

They ask about the food, my work, the other Eligibles, and I recite my answers as naturally as possible, like a good machine.

"Last one," Erik whispers to me as a middle-aged man steps forward with his vlip recorder thrust in front of him to catch my response. He's dressed in an unremarkable navy blue suit and he looks as bored as I'm starting to feel. I sift through my prepared responses for the answer to the only question left unasked and wait to answer, ready to retreat back to the comfortable chair in my rebound chamber.

"Miss Lewys," he begins smoothly. "Can you tell us what happened to your parents, Benn and Meria Lewys?"

NINE

ERIK'S RESPONSE TO THE QUESTION is so expertly choreographed that I can see him rising above personal assistant soon. If the other Stream reporters felt any allegiance to this man, they don't show it. Instead, several back away from him. Jost gently takes my arm and pulls me into the rebound company's lounge, but I can see the vlip operators and reporters part for the guards. The man who asked about my parents doesn't put up a fight, but he keeps his eyes on me as they lead him away.

"Sorry about that," Erik says, moving to block my view of the activity in the station hall.

Play dumb. I can see it in Jost's eyes.

I shake my head. "Guess he didn't get his question memo in time."

"Probably not." Erik smiles. "We still need to do the image shoot. I think everything is reorganized and ready for you."

I follow him back into the silent hall. The Stream crew gathers around us mechanically, but no one speaks. The flash of cameras and hurried instructions from my aestheticians do little to distract from the somber atmosphere in the echoing hall. I turn to see the rosy-cheeked reporter who'd joked during the interview standing at my side. I meet his eyes and smile, but he looks away. These reporters may not have stopped the guards from taking the other man away, but obviously they feel the sting of it.

I'm too distracted to enjoy my next rebound, but this time when the stewardess helps me from my seat I'm not dizzy, which is good because Cormac is waiting in the doorway, and I don't want him to see me stumbling around. He immediately drags me into a small bar next to the lounge. The place is empty. Not even a bartender is here, thanks to the travel restrictions security has arranged. I perch on a tall mahogany stool and rest my arm on the cool wooden counter, feeling a bit out of place.

"I hear you had some excitement," he says, straightening his black bow tie as he surreptitiously looks me over.

"I guess so." I shrug like I hadn't noticed.

“It was nothing,” Erik says as he strides over to him. “Adelice handled it like a pro.”

“I bet she did,” Cormac responds. “Where’s my valet?”

“I’m here,” Jost calls from the door.

“Good, make me a highball,” Cormac orders. Turning back to me, he says, “It’s really incredible. I can have him make you one. I’m strongly considering reassigning Jost to a permanent position. He’s the only valet who knows his place.”

I stare blankly at this suggestion, but manage to shake my head at the drink offer. I don’t like the idea of him taking Jost away from the Coventry, and I bet Jost wouldn’t either.

“Probably best. Wouldn’t want you drunk for the Stream crews.”

I quickly learn that Cormac’s idea of keeping on time is different from the rest of the group’s. His schedule apparently calls for a quick cocktail followed by syrupy banter with the long-legged stewardess who made the mistake of coming to check on us.

It’s Erik who finally says something. “Sir, we need to hurry or we’ll have to cut the image shoot.”

“The image shoot? Didn’t they get enough poses at Nilus?”

“Yes,” I break in, forcing myself to sound sweet, “but not with you.” Even I’m grossed out by how saccharine my words sound.

“I guess you’re right. They’ll want photos of me with my escort,” he says, looking away from the girl and downing the remnants of his drink.

“Of course,” I continue in the sugary voice, “and we don’t want you drunk for the Stream crews either.”

So much for sweet.

Cormac’s grin slips from his face, and he elbows past us to the bar’s door.

“Adelice,” he says with his back to me, “try to keep a lid on it.”

“Of course, Cormac,” I reply. I know better than to provoke him this way, but I hate the way the rest of his team kowtows to him. I can only imagine the panic attack Enora would be having at this point.

“You seem to have quite the effect on him,” Erik murmurs, coming up beside me.

“Cormac and I have an understanding.”

Erik raises an eyebrow. Clearly he’s got the wrong idea.

“Don’t worry. It’s a death-threat thing.”

“Oh,” Erik says, “just that.”

The crews here are on their best behavior, and I wonder if they’ve been prepped on the situation in Nilus. There’s no good-natured ribbing or unapproved questions. The interview runs as precisely as loom-work, and although the image shoot with Cormac is less than comfortable, it’s over quickly. He slides an arm around my waist, signaling me to cozy up to him. Standing this close together, I notice an antiseptic smell that hangs on him, covering up his cologne. It burns my eyes.

“For the love of Arras, smile, sister,” a broad-faced photographer calls from behind the snapping cameras, but he shuts up when a guard edges his way.

“I’d appreciate it if you made this look natural,” Cormac hisses through his perfect rows of blinding teeth.

“I’m trying,” I force through my widemouthed smile.

“They’ve got it, sir,” Erik informs him from the side, and Cormac drops his arm and strides back to the private lounge.

We don’t speak again except when he barks at me to look happy at the next station. By the last rebound of the day, I’m getting bored. Eating while rebounding is harder than I imagined. It’s difficult to balance the food on my fork while the room shifts and shimmers around me. By the time we arrive in Cypress, where we’ll stay overnight, I’m hungry and cranky. I answer the interview questions mechanically and smile brightly for the camera, but I’m looking forward to spending some time alone in my hotel room before my aestheticians arrive to dress me for tonight’s scheduled appearance.

I’ve been in my room for about twenty minutes, waiting for room service, when my prep crew flies in.

“I hope you had something to eat,” Valery trills as she lays out my long satin gown on the bed.

“I’m supposed to have private time,” I snap back. “I’m still waiting for my food.”

“You can eat while we work,” she assures me, not meeting my eyes. “As long as it’s not messy. Enora wants you ready to go half an hour before the event.”

“Even from afar she tortures me,” I say with a groan.

Valery shoots me a disapproving look. “Enora is only looking out for you—” she begins, but she doesn’t finish the thought, because my food arrives.

My dinner of roast goose and sweet potato curry looks delicious, but as the girls work on me I only find time to snatch a handful of bites. There’s always someone powdering me or doing my nails.

“May I enter?” Jost asks from the sliding door to my room.

“Yes,” I croak out against Valery’s hand, which is firmly holding my jaw as she plucks my eyebrows.

“You look lovely.” Jost laughs as he comes into the room.

“Oh, shut up.”

Valery sighs and lets go of my face. She gives him a scathing look as she squeezes past him to pull my adornments from the trunks the crew brought with them.

“That looks good,” he says, pointing to the goose. “I had the duck.”

My stomach rumbles as he draws my attention back to the food, and I tilt my head toward the girl carefully painting my fingernails to indicate why I haven’t been able to eat.

“Here,” Jost offers, picking up the plate and gathering a forkful of the potatoes.

I take the bite gratefully. The dish has grown cold but the curry still pops along my tongue.

“Thank you,” I mumble with my mouth half-full.

“It’s my pleasure.”

Jost stands next to me and carefully sneaks me a few more bites as the girls continue with their prep. Soon the gnawing hunger evaporates, and I find myself enjoying the light touch of my aestheticians expertly curling my hair and massaging cream onto my legs. With a full belly, I don’t even notice I’m tired until Valery’s irritated cough rouses me from an impromptu nap.

“We’re ready to dress you,” she says.

I nod and look around the room for Jost, but he must have left when I fell asleep.

“He’s not here,” Valery tells me as she helps me step into the cool satin gown.

“I’m sorry?” I ask.

“Jost,” she says, and it’s clear from her voice that she doesn’t buy my innocent act. “A valet? When you could have someone like Erik?”

“Or Cormac?” her assistant offers as she zips me up.

“I really don’t know what you’re talking about,” I say, but I can feel my cheeks growing hot.

“Oh stop it or you’ll ruin your cosmetics.” Valery laughs. “Don’t get the wrong idea. He’s very good-looking for a valet. His eyes are as blue as Erik’s, but he’s …”

I give her a drop-it look, and she holds out a bracelet, which I cuff onto my wrist.

“It’s probably for the best,” her assistant continues. “Cormac goes through the ladies pretty quickly, and Erik …”

I can’t help but turn to listen to what she has to say about him.

“He’s Maela’s.” Valery finishes the thought.

“Good thing I’m not interested in any of them,” I say, but I keep my eyes on the mirror.

In the reflection, I spy Valery and the girl exchange meaningful looks.

“Sure, honey.” But when her assistant goes to retrieve more of my adornments, Valery drops her lips to my ear and whispers, “Take the happiness you can, even if it’s only a little.”

Valery straightens up as soon as the girl reenters with my necklace, but her words lodge themselves in my head. Watching her movements in the mirror, lithe and purposeful without a trace of resentment for her assignment, I hope she’s happy and wish I could be.

“So exactly what’s on the agenda tonight?” I ask Erik when he meets me at the door.

“Well, you looking beautiful for one thing,” he says, and I have to hold myself back from laughing.

“Does that stuff work with the other girls?” I ask, barely containing my amusement.

“Yeah,” he says, grinning widely. “How are you so immune to my charms?”

“Years of segregation,” I say, letting myself smile a little.

“That usually works in my favor,” he admits in a whisper as Cormac exits his room to meet us.

It’s not that I don’t like Erik. I even think he’s charming. Maybe it’s my years of inexperience with boys that make his flirtations more awkward than endearing.

“You look lovely, Adelice,” Cormac says, taking my hand. He ushers me out to the waiting motocarriage. I wobble on my high pinpoint heels as I step out of the hotel, but Erik’s hand shoots out to steady me. Before I can thank him, he’s faded back behind me. Stream crews call out questions, but I can’t see past the perpetual flashes of light from their cameras. I press closer to Cormac for safety despite his stinging smell. Part of me wishes I had a few doses of Valpron right now to make the whole thing easier, but I suppose it’s for the best that I don’t. I’m going to need to keep my wits about me if I’m going to get through the evening without making a serious social blunder.

Cormac beams and calls many of the crewmen by name. He answers questions, keeping his arm tightly around my waist the whole time. Once we’re safely inside the motocarriage, I pull out of his grasp and run my hand along my dress to smooth out the wrinkles where he held me.

“Can’t wait to get away from me?” he asks, his dark eyes gone hard.

“I’m overwhelmed,” I admit.

“Don’t worry about it,” he reassures me, lighting a cigar. “We’re doing a simple ribbon cutting ceremony, a few pictures, and then back to the hotel.”

No more dinners or meetings or interviews after this. It’s such a relief.

“I can cut a ribbon,” I tell him confidently.

“Arras, I hope so. You’re a Spinster after all.” He keeps the condescending grin on his face as he puffs smoke rings.

I’m not sure what to make of Cormac. I hate him, but increasingly, I’m not sure I’m justified in that. Sure, he’s creepy and arrogant, but of the people I’ve met since my retrieval, strangely, he’s shown me the most respect. If you call brutal honesty respect, that is.

The motocarriage pulls up to a large crowd. Most of the neighborhood must be here. Seeing that many people makes my hands shake, which is going to be problematic if I have to cut a ribbon. Cormac opens my door and helps me out. There are Stream crews and dozens of people. But something about the crowd is strange. On each of our stops, the people have been frenzied, trying to touch us or calling our names, but the

citizens here are fairly calm. Some even look bored, as though they were forced to come. They probably were, but that's nothing new.

"So why are we cutting a ribbon here?" I ask Cormac as he escorts me to a large brick building. I look for the telltale sign that will indicate what its purpose is, but I can't find it due to the audience surrounding the structure.

"It's their new academy," he answers, placing one hand on my elbow and guiding me firmly to the front door.

If it wasn't for his arm propelling me forward, I would have stopped on the spot.

"I'm cutting a ribbon at an academy," I say, turning to him, "in Cypress."

Cormac keeps his gaze on the path in front of us and doesn't respond. Suddenly I'm remembering why I hate him. So that's why I'm here. As a reminder of what I've done. The threat isn't lost on me. Looking out over the crowd, I wonder why they're so placid. The Guild must have fed them a lot of lies to keep them from turning on us. Did they say it was an accident like the story Amie told us about Mrs. Swander?

Even if they did, the people here are too complacent. There's not a single person with a hint of rage or pain flashing across his or her face.

And then it hits me. They don't know what happened.

"What did you do to them?" I whisper.

"Why would I do anything to them?" Cormac asks with feigned innocence.

"What do they think happened to the academy?" I ask, unwilling to play his little game.

"That's not the point, doll," Cormac says with a smirk. "This isn't about them. It's about you."

By this point, we're at the door and he hands me a pair of giant ceremonial scissors. Sadly, they're heavy and dull. All for show. But maybe if I aim just right …

Cormac's grin fades, and he steps back. Not in fear, but to let me know he can see what I'm thinking and that it won't work. He's saved from me trying by another man, from the looks of it an official, who strides over.

As soon as Cormac turns to speak with him, an older woman approaches, eyeing me interestedly. She's not a Cypress citizen. Her age shows in her withered skin and silver hair, but even with the marks of time all over her, I see no sign of the deep, honey skin and silky black hair the citizens of Cypress share.

"You're Cormac's escort then?" she asks.

"Yes," I say, trying to hold my chin up.

"Shameless," she mutters, as I realize that she's older than anyone else I've met. Even in Romen, basic renewal patching assures everyone a relatively youthful appearance, but this woman's skin is as brittle and wrinkled as old paper, despite the layer of cosmetics she wears. She has to be here with the Guild, maybe she's even a Spinster stationed at the Northern Coventry, but she's clearly not taking advantage of the renewal patching available.

"Loricel, I see you've met my escort," Cormac says, returning to my side.

"Yes, and I think it's shameless," she tells him solemnly.

"Adelice," he says, "allow me to introduce Loricel. Keep your hands back. She bites."

"Watch yourself," Loricel warns, "or I'll rip your ass right out of Arras."

"We have a love-hate relationship," he says to me. "Adelice is our newest Spinster. Her aptitude tests are off the chart," he tells her.

"So you're the one that has Cormac's attention. He hasn't been so interested in the Western Coventry in years," she says, squinting to look more closely at me. There's a sparkle of something—respect, maybe—in her eyes now. I can't help returning her interest. This is the woman I've heard of in bits and pieces from Enora. The Creweler. I'm finally meeting the most powerful woman in Arras, and I'm not sure what to say to her.

Before I can respond, a guard dressed in full Guild regalia approaches, and Cormac leans in to talk to him. With the chatter around us, I can't hear what he's saying, but it doesn't stop me from trying.

"So are you enjoying yourself?" Loricel asks me.

"No," I say, distracted by my eavesdropping.

Loricel raises one eyebrow, revealing a map of wrinkles etched along her forehead, and laughs. "Good. You're exactly what they said."

“And that is?” I ask, trying to keep the curiosity I feel out of my voice.

“Smart and foolhardy,” she says. “It’s a great combination for making conversation, but not the best for staying alive.”

“That’s what they tell me.”

“They’re keeping you off the loom?”

I nod, wondering how she knows that, but then I remember what Enora said about her. As Creweler, Loricel would know everything going on in Arras.

“They’re trying to win you over,” she informs me. “They’ll try appealing to your desires first. Clothes. Power. Parties.”

“And if that doesn’t work?” I ask.

“Then they go after your heart.”

“Aren’t they the same thing?”

She smiles and the lines on her face soften. “How old are you?”

“Sixteen.”

“Most sixteen-year-olds,” Loricel says, “don’t know the difference between love and desire. That’s how they keep Spinsters weaving, and why they test at such an early age. You’re blinded by silk and wine.”

“I don’t care much for wine,” I say flatly.

“What do you care for?” she asks, but before I can answer she continues. “Because that’s what they’ll go after.”

My heart beats wildly, and I remember how easily Cormac pulled the surveillance of Amie walking to her new home from academy.

“My sister,” I whisper to myself.

“They’ll find the others first. They’ll save her for last,” Loricel says, shaking her head.

“There are no others,” I say.

“Don’t be so sure of that. You might not know who they are, but the Guild does.”

“Why do you care?” I ask, not bothering to hide my curiosity. She’s nothing like I expected.

“Because I once sat where you are, with a handsome, smarmy Guild official, and no one told me,” she says, and the lines on her face reappear. With a curt nod, she strides away and disappears into the crowd.

“That old witch scare you?” Cormac asks, coming back over to me.

I shake my head. “No, she doesn’t approve of me escorting you.”

“She wouldn’t,” he says.

I’m forced to smile and pose for the cameras while the Cypress crowd mills about. There’s nothing natural about how they’re acting, and I wonder if they’ve been given Valpron for the evening to ensure our safety. When the ribbon flutters to the ground, I hand the scissors back to Cormac.

“Your point’s been proven,” I say, my words thick. Something about the audience’s disinterest makes me feel the shame more acutely, as though I’m hurting for them because they can’t.

“Oh, not yet,” he whispers.

I don’t bother to ask him what this means. I’m tired of his cryptic warnings and little jokes, so I turn back to the crowd and stare out across the sea of ebony hair. The citizens of Cypress look so similar, just like Pryana. I must look like a freak to them with my pale skin and fiery hair.

And that’s when I spot her.

Pale golden hair that wisps around her ears. A spot of light in the dark. She’s as bored as the rest of them. She’s also one of the only girls here tonight.

Most of the others were killed.

But she’s been rewoven, I think, *to a more deserving family*. And my actions placed her here, with a family that deserved a child in exchange for the one Maela’s hook stole.

I don’t even think. I dash toward her. This actually elicits a response from the crowd. Men jump back and mothers snatch up toddlers from the ground. I must look insane, flying through the masses, my hair whipping behind me and my ankles barely keeping me straight up in my heels. All that matters is getting to her, and no one tries to stop me. They’re too surprised.

When I reach her, a woman pulls her close to her side, and I look at her more carefully. Unlike the others, this surrogate mother regards me with fear. But Amie stares at me with blank curiosity. There’s no hint of recognition in her eyes. The eager greeting, the one she used to give me every day after academy, doesn’t spring from her lips.

She has no idea who I am.

“Amie,” I whisper, stretching out my hand, and willing her to remember.

“Her name is Riya,” the woman informs me, her voice full of warning. “She’s my daughter.”

“Her name is Amie,” I challenge her under my breath.

“My name is Riya,” Amie repeats, mimicking the woman’s warning. But there’s a sadness in her tone. Not for herself, but for me—for the crazy girl whispering desperate lies in front of her.

A warm hand touches my shoulder gently.

“Come on,” Jost says gruffly. “We need to go.”

I look at him, barely able to see him through the veil of tears I’m trying to keep from falling. He leads me back to the waiting guard. Cormac is off somewhere, saying his farewells, but I’m sure he caught my little scene. Just like I’m sure he orchestrated this whole evening.

“Are you okay?” Jost asks.

“Fine. It was a mistake,” I lie to him.

But I can tell from his face that he doesn’t buy it. “I have to check on Ambassador Patton. We’ll be leaving in a few minutes.”

I try to let his words reassure me, but they don’t, so I open my own door and slide into my seat to wait for Cormac to be finished with his schmoozing. I’m about to shut my eyes to escape this horrible night when Erik slides into the motocarriage next to me.

“I have to make this quick,” he says.

“Sure,” I say, the surprise distracting me for a moment.

“Cormac’s sending me back to the hotel alone.”

“You’re not coming with us?” I ask, alarmed.

“No.” Erik looks me straight in the eyes. “Cormac’s a powerful man, and it’s stupid of me to advise it, but if he tries anything, knee him in the crotch.”

My eyes snap open and I have to press my lips shut to hold back laughter. “You got it,” I manage, barely keeping it together. Trust Erik to make me laugh at a time like this.

“Here.” He presses a thin microdisk into my hand.

“What’s this?” I ask, carefully fingering the disk before tucking it into my handbag.

“Pop it into the drive on your digifile and it will connect you to me,” he says. “Let me know when you make it back.”

He’s staring intensely at me as he says this, and I feel my breath catch in my throat. “Do you really think …” I begin, but I can’t finish the thought.

“I never know what to think with Cormac,” Erik says. “That’s the problem.”

Before I can stop myself my hand stretches and grabs his. He squeezes it reassuringly, then drops it, and slips back out of the motocarriage. If I go now, I could catch up with him, but I might get him in trouble. But the alternative—leaving alone with Cormac—terrifies me.

“Ready to go?” Cormac asks, getting into the seat next to me. Too late.

“Of course.” I swallow against the dread sitting raw in my throat.

“What did Erik want?”

I hesitate for a second. “He wanted to go over tomorrow’s itinerary since he’s headed back to the hotel.”

Cormac regards me thoughtfully and then smiles. “Attention to detail. I like that. He’ll be advancing out of the Coventry in no time. I want to show you something,” Cormac says. He avoids sitting too close, and I don’t blame him. I’m sure he knows his plan worked.

I don’t bother to say anything about what happened tonight, and neither does he. The message was clear enough without him having to spell it out for me. We only ride for a few minutes, but in the dark I can’t see much through the motocarriage’s tinted windows. When we finally stop, Cormac opens his own door and walks around to mine. The driver stays inside.

As he helps me out, I’m met by a near-black sky dotted with sparkling stars. We’ve exited only steps from the edge of a precipice. In the darkness, I can barely see the valley hundreds of feet below us. Stretching past it, lights blink and waver, marking diminutive cities scattered around the cliff.

Cormac drops my hand and steps closer to the edge. Stretching his arm over the abyss, he calls to me, “It’s yours for the taking, Adelice.”

I clasp my palms across my bare arms and shiver against the breeze.

*

Cormac sits silently in the seat diagonal from me on the ride back, and I wonder if, with all the posing and Cormac's eager hands on my waist earlier, I jumped to the wrong conclusion when all he wanted was to show me a vista. But after tonight's charade, I'm not sure what any of it means anymore.

Between holding back tears and the crippling guilt washing over me, I can barely keep my eyes open. It's exhausting, but as I'm drifting off, Cormac's voice startles me awake. I snap to attention, but then I realize he isn't speaking to me. His head is cocked to the side, so I close my eyes again and listen.

"You've known about the situation in Northumbria for weeks," he says. "It shouldn't take this long to deal with a simple taint."

He pauses, and I wish I could hear what he's being told. Complant convos are too one-sided.

"I see."

I peek through my lashes to see that he's frowning.

"This is getting out of hand. If we can't find the source, we're going to have to alter the entire Eastern Sector," he says, "and, Hannox …"

My heart flutters at this name, but I can't recall where I've heard it.

"Did you get anything out of that guy from Nilus? Yeah, if this thing has spread way up there …" He pauses in response to something Hannox is saying. "I don't think Protocol Two is necessary at this point, but have Intelligence draw up a plan."

I'm still watching through barely open eyelids, pretending to sleep, when he leans forward and places his head in his hands. Then he looks up at me and I almost stop breathing. He keeps his gaze on me for a minute, then pours another whiskey.

TEN

THE MORNING COMES IN STREAKS of purple outside my hotel window. It's the real sky, something I never see at the compound, where every view is a programmed image. This is the dawn that awakens citizens in Cypress, and for the first time since the motocarriage, I close my eyes. Opening them, I pretend I'm waking up like I might if I lived out here. It's time to prep for work. I'll tram into the metro, and perch at a desk waiting for telebounds and coffee rationing. No, I'm prepping tablets for the day's curriculum. I'll teach about the seasons. How each serves a function and is carefully timed to maximize its usefulness to food Spinsters. But the lesson fades, replaced by looms and fingers and stone walls. This room is no more real than my life there; both were created by Spinsters.

I'm not out of bed before a maid comes bustling into the room to clean up.

"I'm so sorry, miss," she exclaims, but something in her voice isn't sorry. Her words sound rehearsed. Of course, I might be getting paranoid at this point, too.

"It's okay," I assure her, slinging my legs out of the bed. "I need to be getting up now anyway." Especially if I'm going to have a minute to myself before my crew gets here to prepare me for our final rebound back to the Coventry.

"I'll get out from under your feet then," the maid offers, but I shake my head, indicating she should stay.

There's not much packing to do, so I order up a small breakfast of scones and tea and plop down to wait in a chair. I'm so used to having someone hovering around me that it doesn't even feel awkward to have the maid here straightening. I watch her work. She's about my mother's age.

"Is there anything I can get you?" the maid asks kindly.

"I'm fine," I say with a smile, not willing to betray the hot anger building in my head by saying more.

“Well,” she starts, but then she stops and a sheepish grin slides onto her face. “I’m sorry. I had hoped to meet you. It was very rude of me to barge in on you this morning.”

So that’s what this was about. Another person eager to see a Spinster or ask for a blessing. It’s not that I mind so much as it makes the guilt bubble up and threaten to spill over. If only she knew I was responsible for the accident that claimed the local academy.

But I simply hold out my hand to her and say, “I’m Adelice.”

“It’s an honor to meet you,” she says, clutching my hand in hers and not letting go. “I thought you might know my daughter. She was retrieved this year as well.”

“Pryana?” I ask the woman, and her face lights up. That’s when I realize it’s no more a coincidence that we came to Cypress for the ribbon cutting ceremony than that we stayed in this hotel. The academy. Amie. And now Pryana’s mother. Cormac wants me to see the consequences of my decisions and remind me of how powerless I am without the strength of the Guild behind me. But his plan has a weakness: now I know where Amie is.

“Oh, you do know her! Is she well?” she asks.

I do my best to muster up a warm smile, and nod. With the loss of her other daughter, even *some* news about Pryana must feel like a gift.

“I’m very sorry about what happened here,” I manage to whisper. Part of me longs to tell her the truth—that I’m the reason the academy was destroyed, but when I gather up the courage to look into her eyes, they stare blankly back at me.

“Sorry for what?” she asks, and her voice is as empty as her eyes.

“For the academy,” I tell her, pulling my hand back from hers.

“It’s lovely,” she says automatically. “I wish it had been this nice when Pryana was attending it.”

“But your daughter …”

“Pryana?” she asks in a confused voice.

“No,” I answer slowly, watching her closely. “Your other daughter and the academy …”

“Pryana is my only daughter,” she says, but something about her tone is not reassuring. There’s no surprise or amusement at my mistake, but only a mechanical, unemotional response to my apology.

“I must have been confused,” I tell her. “I thought Pryana said she had a sister.”

“She’s an only child,” her mother says, and her face brightens again. “My pride and joy.”

“So what exactly happened to the academy?” I ask, less interested in the facts than in what she believes occurred.

“It was upgraded. We got called to a town hall meeting, well, the girl neighborhoods,” she says, and the automatic tone returns; but for just a moment she seems to struggle with what happened at that meeting. “Anyway, they upgraded the girls’ academy. It makes sense to me. We’ve produced more Spinsters here than any other metro in the four sectors.”

I swallow hard and turn from her.

“Pryana mentioned that,” I say in a quiet voice, my mind no longer centered on this conversation.

“It sounds like you two are good friends,” her mother says happily, and I don’t have the heart to correct her. “Will you do something for me?”

“Anything,” I say, expecting her to give me a message for Pryana, but instead, she leans in to whisper, “Keep an eye on her for me.”

That won’t be hard.

*

Enora meets me at the rebound station back at the Western Coventry and drags me away before Jost or Erik can join us. I feel awful for not thanking them for watching out for me this weekend, but since Enora can barely control her shaking hands, I go along with her.

“You’re wanted upon arrival,” she tells me.

“Okay.” I consider telling her about the conversation I overheard between Cormac and Hannox but don’t know where to start.

“Have you manipulated the weave again without a machine?” she asks me in a quiet voice. Her gaze is so demanding I almost believe I have. It’s clear she assumes as much.

“No.” I pause and try to remember if that’s right. “No, I don’t think so.”

“No or maybe?” she presses.

“No,” I repeat more confidently. “What is this about?”

“You’ve been called to train,” she says in a small voice.

“With Maela?” I ask, not hiding my annoyance.

“With Loricel.”

Now I understand why Enora is shaking.

“Oh,” I say. “I met her in Cypress.”

“You must have made quite an impression,” Enora says.

“She knew about me,” I tell her, “and she didn’t approve of me being there with Cormac.”

“She wouldn’t.”

“That’s what he said. And I agree. He is too old for me,” I joke, trying to lighten the mood.

But Enora isn’t laughing. “Loricel doesn’t approve of his influence on the Coventry. She thinks we should be self-governed.”

“Aren’t we?”

“Loricel may be, but the rest of the Spinsterhood is closely monitored by the Guild. We may be more powerful than the rest of the female citizenry, but that’s not much to boast about.”

I think back to Cormac’s orders, his conversation about Protocol Two, and the way he offered me Arras like it was his. Amie’s voice rings in my head: *control—Spinsters have control*. Had I believed it, too?

“Should I tell her about what I can do?” I ask under my breath.

Enora’s gaze stays on me, but behind her eyes she drifts somewhere else. When she finally speaks, her voice is as hollow and distant as her eyes are. “No. I’ve learned from experience that some secrets must be kept, even from someone with the best of intentions.”

I search her face for a sign that she realizes she’s made a value statement. She’s been honest and not spoken in riddles, if only for a moment. And though I still don’t confess about Cormac, or Erik’s concern, or Jost feeding me dinner, it brings us closer. I can’t deny the wall between us, separating us from total honesty, but I’m no longer sure which of us built it.

But one thing is bothering me. “Speaking of secrets. Why didn’t you warn me about the Cypress event?”

Enora’s look says it all: because she didn’t know about it.

“What about the Cypress event?” she asks quietly. “We didn’t get the Stream for that.”

“Nothing,” I mutter, and before she can question me further, we’re back within the compound’s walls.

Enora doesn’t give me time to change out of my traveling suit. Instead she drags me to the airy room where I was assigned the first day I became a Spinster. I haven’t been back here since then. The window is open and chiffon curtains swirl around it. I look at the loom—my loom—more carefully. It’s polished and looks untouched. The series of gears on either side of it are still, waiting for me to will them to life. And next to the silent machine, Loricel waits.

I’m jealous of her simple navy pantsuit. I can’t remember the last time I was allowed to wear pants. I’m also struck by how powerful she looks in comparison to most Spinsters. She’s not overdone like the others.

“Thank you, Enora,” she says.

Enora nods. “Is there anything I can get you?”

“No, this will be fine,” she says, drawing up one of the studio chairs. “The wall screens are lovely here, don’t you think?”

I smile, not sure what to say.

“I want to work with Adelice alone today,” she says to Enora, and my mentor smiles. It’s the first time she hasn’t looked scared to leave my side.

“Access Alpha L,” Loricel says out loud when Enora’s left the room.

“Access granted,” a disembodied voice sings from the panel.

“Turn off security monitors and audio surveillance,” Loricel commands.

“Monitors and surveillance will be turned off for one hour.”

“That’s better,” she says to me, patting the seat next to her.

I sit and stare at her.

“How is your training going?” she asks.

I blush at the question. I barely know how to turn on the loom, never having woven on the machine unsupervised. “It’s not,” I answer honestly.

“I figured. Cormac never has the right priorities.”

“It’s my fault,” I confess. “I haven’t made training me easy.”

“No Creweler ever does,” she mutters.

“Oh, I’m not a—”

“You are a Creweler. You have been since you were eight years old.”

My mouth falls open, and for the life of me, I can’t shut it. I was eight the first time I accidentally caught time while playing in my yard. Mom had made me smooth it out, and then she huddled with Dad at the dinner table, talking in the hushed voices parents use when they’re worried. A scene that became too familiar at supper.

“Part of my job is to find and train the next Creweler. I found you that day when you slipped.”

“So you always knew?” I ask, my voice barely a whisper.

“For a long time I’ve been worried about my age. I am more capable up here,” she tells me, tapping her head, “than anyone else in this forsaken Coventry, but this body is failing. I needed to find my replacement.”

I remember the nights I spent training to fail the testing, crawling through the holes under my house, the body bag in my dining room, but it was pointless because they were always coming for me.

“I’ve known it was you for a long time,” she says sadly. “But when your parents tried to teach you to fail, I hoped they would succeed.”

“Why?” I feel oddly violated by her admission. She’d watched me for years and yet not stepped in when things went very wrong on the night of my retrieval.

“I am sorry for your parents and your sister. I could do nothing to save them.” Loricel pauses. “I had to give you every opportunity to escape this and that meant sacrificing them.”

Tears rise up, threatening to choke me. I try desperately to focus my anger on everyone else and not on the old woman sitting next to me.

“There are things I need to teach you that the Guild cannot know about, but things are moving more quickly than I expected,” she admits with a sigh.

I know if I open my mouth to ask her what things, I’ll start sobbing, so I stare ahead instead. Rising from her chair, Loricel walks over to the wall and enters a code on the companel with surprising speed. Almost instantly the gears of the loom begin churning. They float against one another and shimmering strands of light snake around them, weaving together. The threads glide onto the surface of the loom, forming a tapestry of light.

“It’s a simple piece.” She runs a finger along the weave in front of us. “I’m assured this is a terminal patient being taken care of at home. Her daughter sent us the request.”

Ripping. She’s here to finish what Maela started. And what kind of daughter puts in a removal request? I try to imagine signing a form asking the Guild to rip my mother. But even though I want to back away, I move forward to inspect the piece.

It’s simply woven with long, thick strands. I can almost see it when I touch the weave: a small house in the country, unadorned by a Spinster’s hand, allowed to flourish and evolve by nature’s course. Unlike the last piece I was given to rip, which was intricately woven with thousands of tiny and unique threads, these strands are rich and coarse, woven into a humble piece. The weakened thread is easy enough to find in such an austere piece, but despite its frailty the strand is long and colored in hints of gold and copper. It’s thick despite wear and even now as it slowly decays, there’s a sense of vibrancy. If Loricel had imagined this would be easier than ripping one of a thousand threads in a complex weave, she’s wrong. Removing this strand feels like a violation—an act against nature. It’s the life force of this piece, and everything this thread touches, regardless of our attempts to repair around it, will be irrevocably damaged once it’s gone.

Taking a silver hook from the small cubby at the edge of the loom, I slide the crook under the large fraying thread and gently pull it loose. It comes out quickly and the threads around the gap look homeless now that I’ve removed their base. The thread hanging on the end of my hook was the starting place for so many of the other threads. Its loss affects them all.

But I feel nothing. I wait for tears or vomit to burn up my throat, but there’s nothing but numbness.

“Now this can be sent to Repair,” Loricel says quietly.

I nod, and Loricel enters a new code. The rest of the piece moves slowly off the loom, creeping to the Repair Department, which will bind the piece back together, closing up the hole and tidying the frayed ends caused by ripping out that one thread.

“*You* could fix it,” I say.

“Yes, I could, but that’s not why I’m here. You must make the hard choice, Adelice, before you can move forward. Decisions must be made. Often between life and death. It is hard to make a decision to save thousands when it compromises one.” Her voice is a hollow whisper, and ghosts echo in her eyes. “It is easier not to be put in that position.

“As Creweler, you can create new places—oceans, lakes, buildings, fields. It can be rewarding,” she continues, and as I watch she enters a new code into the companel. A moment later, a new piece of Arras appears on the loom. It’s nearly blank, a hint of green glistening against the bands of gold, and she clicks the zoom wheel to bring it into more detailed focus. It’s a simple piece of land. Maybe a park or a field lying outside metro limits somewhere. There are no trees, no rocks, just a valley of lush, green grass. For the first time I notice the small bag she carries with her as she places it at the foot of the loom and gestures that I should let her sit on the stool.

“Normally, I work in my own studio, but I brought my supplies with me today,” she says with a kind smile. “You must get a feel for your own loom. I have clearance to call up the weave on any machine. Now if I must show you destruction, I want to balance that with the beauty of what we can do.”

From the bag, she draws out spools of thin blue thread. It’s hard to describe what raw material looks like. The color of the strands is an innuendo—the possibility of color rather than a clear shade. As though I understand it’s blue only because I’ve seen the color before. The thread itself is light and cool to the touch, and when she unwraps it from the spool it glimmers and sparks with energy. This is the very raw material that is sewn into the weave by the skilled hands of Spinsters, composing all objects in Arras. I can’t think about it too much, because part of my ability stems from my hands’ natural desire to weave. My conscious mind plays little role in the task. I’ve added to Arras before, but that act adhered to a strict pattern established by more experienced Spinsters.

After carefully removing some of the green threads from the weave on the loom, Loricel takes a blue strand, and slipping it through a small thin needle, begins to add it to the spot. She works quickly but expertly, subtracting the green and adding the blue in a tight weave. When the entire section has been replaced, she takes another piece of sheer thread

and embroiders along the edge. My mother cross-stitched kitchen towels when I was a child and the technique is similar, but Loricel uses no pattern and her embroidery illuminates the section. Even in its abstract state, the weave is stunning.

“This binds the new addition,” she explains as she finishes embroidering the edge. “It’s key to permanently altering the weave.” When it’s done, she puts the extra raw materials back into her bag and clicks the zoom wheel on the loom. Where previously she’d shown me a simple valley, a radiant lake now resides. A source of water for the residents nearby.

“Later, the farmers can add fish, and the town can ration it as food,” she explains. “I’m particularly fond of adding lakes. Something about water tugs at my soul.”

I am silent with awe, finally understanding her significance now. With the ripped strand from earlier resting in my palm, I feel in even greater contrast to the woman sitting beside me. She is life. I am death.

*

I’m not surprised when Enora announces I’m training for Crewel work as we walk to the dining room that evening during our meal shift. At the table I sit next to her and watch as Pryana takes her spot at the end of the table—next to my empty chair. We’re assigned to sit by rank of importance at the table. Now only Pryana, who is still training, sits at the end. To anyone else she would look oblivious, but I see the slight fury blazing in her cheeks when she spies me toward the front of the table. Her head stays down throughout dinner. I feel badly for her. At least I have Enora, but Pryana sits alone, isolated from the rest of the group. I’m sure she hates me even more now.

“How long have you been training, dear?” The Spinster who speaks to me draws out her words until they sound like warm, thick honey dripping slowly off her tongue. She must be from the southern stretches of Arras. We don’t have much of an accent in the Western Sector.

“What day is it?” With the traveling, I’ve lost track of the date.

The Spinster oozes a slow chuckle. “It’s October fifth, dear.”

The still-warm air had a bite to it the day I made my fateful slip at the testing facility back home. The leaves were barely yellowing, and running home might have pinkened my cheeks, but a jacket wasn't necessary yet. That was September. Only a couple weeks of my life have been spent in the Coventry. In many ways my life in Romen feels like a faded, long-past memory, and yet it seems that only yesterday my mother commanded me to clean my room or I braided Amie's hair. My memories of them are vivid, but blurry at the edges as though they are slipping away.

"Less than a month," I say out loud. I don't tell her how much of that time was spent in cells.

"A month?" Her eyes widen, and her deeply lined lids look garish and frightening. "That must be some kind of record."

A few of the others nod in amazed agreement. Enora, who has been busy talking to the woman next to her, notices my discomfort and jumps in. "She scored very highly on her aptitude tests and we needed more help in the Crewel department, so we brought her up."

She smiles warmly and everyone relaxes into other conversations, except the southern Spinster, whose eyes stay fixed on Enora in a fierce way. She looks like a caged animal, both frightened and eager. I don't like the way she stares at my mentor. Who could be threatened by Enora? I make a mental note to steer clear of this woman from now on. She's a climber.

I pretend to lose interest in everything but eating, but I feel eyes on me. I look up to discover Maela studying me. We are roughly equal in our positions at the table. She heads up the lower Spinsters, and I trail behind the trained Spinsters, apprenticed to Crewel work, so we overlap. I see the wheels turning in her mind. Eyes slightly glazed, the purse of her lips, the tightness of her jaw; she has nowhere to go, and I've only begun my own rise in this world. But she'll find a way to climb farther up—her kind always does.

"Are you excited?" the southern Spinster asks sweetly.

"I'm sorry." I blush, confused by her question. "Should I be?"

"For the State of the Guild ball," she says, as though it's the most obvious thing in the world. "It's next week."

“You’re right,” I say, remembering images from the *Bulletin*. The ball was always held in the autumn months. “I had forgotten.”

“Will Cormac be escorting you to this event, too?” The sugar is gone from her voice.

“No,” Enora says, looking directly at the other woman. “Spinsters don’t have escorts at events held within the Coventry, remember?”

“I must have forgotten,” the woman says flatly, and turns back to her other conversation.

I guess we won’t be friends after all.

“Don’t worry, your dress is ready,” Enora whispers from her spot a few spaces down.

“I didn’t think I’d have to ward off Cormac for a while,” I mutter, not sure she can hear me.

Enora snorts. “Think again.”

ELEVEN

THE WHOLE EVENT IS OVER-THE-TOP. I should have expected as much with Guild officials in attendance, but despite my being used to feeling surprised at the ridiculousness of the Coventry, this is too much.

It began with my dress. I'd felt out of place in my gown at the ribbon-cutting ceremony in Cypress, but tonight I feel naked. Even now as I idly shake hands and dance with official after official, I feel nothing like myself. At least with my usual wardrobe of dress suits I'm mostly covered. To say this dress leaves nothing to the imagination is an understatement. Made of emerald-green silk, it flows down along the curves of my body. Not that I have any, but something about this gown—and the subsequent lack of underwear it necessitates—makes it look like I do. It drapes down and rests at my tailbone, exposing my entire back, and I don't even want to think about the front. The thinness of the vibrant silk feels like nothing at all. I might as well clutch some fig leaves and hide in the corner.

The photographers go wild over nearly nude me and over Pryana, who's dressed in a strapless black velvet gown that lets one of her long amber legs slip through a thigh-high slit to reveal she's stockingless. As they click and capture, I spy a whole pig on a spit in the middle of the room, an apple shoved ceremoniously in his mouth. I know just how he feels. Pryana seems much more comfortable in front of the cameras, flashing her dazzling smile and striking spontaneous poses. I don't usually fall into the shy category, but I've never been the center of attention like this before.

A strong hand grabs my elbow and keeps me from fading into the background of the party. "You're at my table," Cormac whispers in my ear.

"My dream come true," I reply.

"I'm sorry?" he says in a voice that dares me to repeat myself.

"I said, lead the way."

Our table is the first in a carefully ordered line near the podium, and far from the noise of the dance floor. As Cormac pulls my chair out for me, I glance at the other name cards. I recognize several of the names, and the throbbing panic I'm trying to hide pulses harder.

"Can I get you a drink?" Cormac asks.

I take one more look around the room, recognizing nearly every man here from the Streams I watched as a child, and nod.

"Sooner or later everyone takes up drinking." He laughs and makes his way over to a small bar in the corner.

I'm inspecting the silver service when the rest of our table joins us. I'm stuck with a group of politicians and their wives. I keep my head down except to take hurried sips of the wine Cormac brings me. Loricel takes a seat, and I feel relief loosen the panic in my chest, but she stares up at the podium, blowing air through her nearly closed lips. The other women ignore her—and me—giggling about so-and-so's dress and who's gone bald. The men discuss policies and people I've never heard of. I find myself intensely grateful for the drink Cormac brought me, even if I can barely handle the way it burns my throat.

Servers arrive with giant silver platters, and I marvel at their ability to carry them. Most of the waiters are typical, gaunt lower-class assignees, brought in especially for the occasion. Fewer rations means less eating, which means less muscle tone. But they balance the platters and serve each plate with precise ease. At least there's food here. I unfold my napkin in anticipation, but Cormac pulls it out of my hands and places it back on the table.

"Not until they bring your plate," he mutters. There's a tinge of horror in his voice at my faux pas.

I keep my eyes on my plate after that. A salad of bitter greens with bits of tart fruit and a sweet dressing. Soup with shark fin and leeks. A large, leaking steak for the men, and petite slices of chicken over a bed of rice for the women. I can't help eyeing Cormac's dinner.

"Here," he says, holding up a forkful. "You already look like you're wasting away."

I savor the bite of juicy meat, and the woman across from me stares as I eat it.

"Magdalena," Cormac says in mock admonishment, and she giggles.

“I can’t remember the last time I saw a woman eat beef,” she admits, and the other two wives at the table laugh in agreement.

“We eat it at the Coventry,” I say, and then flush for drawing attention to myself.

“Of course *you* do,” Magdalena says. “You have third-gen renewal patching. Only second gen is available to us.”

“Oh.” I have no idea what she’s talking about.

“I heard they’re working on a fourth gen,” another wife says in a low voice as the men return to talk of politics.

“Good, they’ll finally release third gen for the rest of us,” Magdalena says to the other wives. “Of course, I can’t imagine what fourth gen is.”

“I hear it’s as if they put you back in the womb. You come out like a baby,” the other tells her.

Magdalena’s eyes stay on me. “I’ll settle for third gen.”

I turn to see Loricel watching this exchange with the hint of an upturned lip. I wonder how old she really is. If she has this much tech at her fingertips, why is she showing her age at all? Or is it that she’s actually extremely old, and only now starting to reveal it?

“Older than you think,” she mutters, and I turn away, embarrassed that she knew what I was thinking.

They’re clearing our dessert plates and offering coffee when a broad-shouldered gentleman crosses to the podium. He waits as the conversation dies down. It’s Prime Minister Carma, current head of state.

“Greetings to you, keepers of Arras. This has been a momentous year. We have seen unprecedented peace and prosperity …”

I’m straining my neck to see him, but I wish I was at home where I could go about my night while the address streamed unobtrusively into my life. Here, next to Cormac, Stream crews are recording guest reactions, so I keep my face blank. They won’t show someone as uninteresting as me. My mind wanders to Jost, and I wonder if he’s stuck serving the officials. I wish he would come and feed me now like he did in Cypress. Jost knew exactly how much to scoop on the fork, and when I was ready for the next bite. I remember how his jacket was warm and soft in the cell. I want him to take care of me now. But even thinking about him is a welcome distraction from this evening’s politics, until

everyone at the table starts to whisper in exhilaration, drawing my attention back to the speech.

“We’re confident that safe mind-mapping will be available to the general public by this time next year,” Prime Minister Carma says from the podium. “Imagine being able to save the treasured memories of your elderly grandparents before their removal or to deal painlessly with behavioral issues in your children. Until now these minor inconveniences have been the only flaws in Arras, but soon they’ll be a thing of the past.”

“Wish we had that last year,” Magdalena says quietly to the other wives. “Korbin held on to his mother for two years before I convinced him to put in the removal request.”

The wife to my left laughs, and whispers, “Not to mention dealing with Joei. I didn’t think I would get her through testing without killing her!”

My eyes meet Loricel’s, but I say nothing.

The speech continues with crop predictions and reports and proposed changes to the weave, which the Guild would apparently be voting on in the coming election. Then the prime minister begins calling on various officials to stand to receive recognition for their contributions throughout the year. When Cormac’s name is called, I try to smile at the vlip recorders that are trained on us.

Prime Minister Carma ends the accolades with his arm pointed to our table. “And, as always, the Guild offers its gratitude for the continued service and skills of the head of Manipulation Services, Loricel.”

She doesn’t stand. She doesn’t even smile. They clap anyway.

*

Cormac is called away when the address is over. Loricel leaves soon after, and I wait at the table, unwilling to risk going near the dance floor, where the older Guild officials linger, dragging Spinsters out to dance. That leaves me to eavesdrop on the gaggle of wives whispering across from me.

“He may have half the women in Arras drooling over him, including you,” Magdalena says, poking the woman next to her, “but he’ll never get the nomination.”

“Men like him, too,” the other wife protests.

“No, they’re jealous. There’s a difference,” Magdalena points out. “And even if we did have a say, he still wouldn’t get elected. Cormac’s single, and no bachelor will ever get elected head of state.”

“You’re just hoping Korbin will get the nod,” whispers the other wife.

I peek over at them and notice Magdalena flinch at this accusation. Her eyes travel to mine.

“Regardless, Cormac won’t ever be prime minister if he keeps running around with little girls,” she says bitterly.

I take this as my cue to finally slip back to my apartment. I’m sure they’ll turn their venom on me next. Scanning the room, I don’t see anyone who will stop me from leaving, unless one of the officials tries to get his hands on me. That’s something I’d like to avoid, as the men who are here alone are as undesirable as they come—dumpy, hairy, and smelly. The only girl who would go after one of them would be a girl after power.

I guess that’s why Pryana’s draping herself over the dumpiest, hairiest, and smelliest of the undesirables—the minister of Ambrica, a large region that contains most of the Eastern Sector. It’s situated along the seaboard, and his bulging waistline is evidence that he enjoys the benefits of a rich seafood diet as well as far too many of the wines that are produced in the region. Unfortunately, he seizes my arm as I try to steal past them.

“You must be the other new hire.” He winks at me, and Pryana glares, her body still pressed against him.

“I suppose so,” I say, as bored as possible.

“You are a fine-looking pair. These days it’s rare we get two ideal new Spinsters at the Western Coventry in one year,” he says, moving so close to me that the stench of garlic and whiskey stings my nose. “But you two are exquisite.”

I try to think of something clever to say without insulting him or encouraging his perverted commentary. I can’t come up with a thing.

Thankfully, Pryana, who appears to be trying to permanently adhere herself to him, steps in and bats her overlong lashes. Her body language tells me to back off, and I want to scream at her that this is the last place I want to be.

The minister grasps Pryana firmly at the waist. “You, my dear, are like midnight.”

She smiles and leans in to whisper in the minister’s ear, but he pulls away and clutches at my wrist. My skin crawls where his doughy hand rests, and I’m grateful my arm is the only thing he can reach. “But you,” he continues in a husky tone, “are like a pearl.”

“Funny, Cormac says the same thing.” It works. He immediately drops his hold on me.

“Pity he had to leave,” the minister slurs. “Called to Northumbria, I hear.”

Why he left is news to me, but I nod as though I’m in on everything. “He said something about it during dinner.”

The minister, a little too drunk, tries to straighten up as though we’re talking official business, which results in Pryana falling off him—literally. Her lips tighten against her teeth and her nostrils flare, but she coolly tugs him away from me. “Dance with me.”

“Oh yes,” the minister slobbers as she pulls him toward the vibrantly lit dance floor in the center of the banquet room. “It was lovely to meet you, Alice.”

Alice. Wonder what he thinks her name is.

“Was he talking to you?” a smooth, strong voice asks from behind. I turn, expecting to see Jost, who I’ve seen wandering about the hall, but find Erik.

“You look disappointed,” he notes.

I am disappointed, but I shake my head. “No, you sounded like someone else.”

A frown passes over his pale face, but it’s gone as quickly as it comes. “If you’re expecting someone else …”

“Oh, well, any moment I’m expecting to be mobbed and eaten alive by fat old men,” I say matter-of-factly.

“I suppose I should leave you to it then.” He pretends to turn away, and I punch him lightly on the shoulder.

“Ouch, you could have mentioned you didn’t want to be mobbed by fat, old men,” he says.

“Why would you ever think I would be?”

He points to Pryana hanging on the minister. “She doesn’t seem to mind.”

“Well, I’m not Pryana.”

“So does that mean you are available for this dance?” He grins at me. No amount of Crewel work or weaving could achieve such a perfectly crooked smile.

I nod, and he leads me over to the floor. Pryana flashes a scathing look in our direction, but immediately turns her attention back to her prey.

“You know, dancing naked is easier than I imagined it would be,” I say without thinking as the music slows and Erik draws me into his arms to dance.

“Naked?” he asks quietly against my ear.

“Oh nothing.” I can’t believe I said it out loud. “I feel naked in this dress.” *Twice*.

“You look it,” he admits. “I have to be honest, I *really* like this dress.”

For some reason this is hysterically funny to me, and I actually begin to giggle. “I should have known that would be your stance.”

“So which of our lascivious ambassadors do you have in your sights?” he asks, scanning the room thoughtfully.

“I’m not sure I follow.”

“They do this every year. Host the State of the Guild here so the officials can drool over the new girls. The other coventries host similar state dinners throughout the year.”

“Gross,” I mutter.

“It is, isn’t it?” he whispers, amused. “But, really, no lucky bachelor this year?”

“I think I’ll let Pryana have her pick,” I say, watching her simper and pout at the minister.

“I doubt his wife will let him bring her home,” Erik responds with a wink.

“Wife?” I pretend to gag.

“Oh, they’re all married,” he informs me. “The young ones’ wives insist on coming, for obvious reasons, but by the time your husband looks like that”—he tips his head at an older man with more hair in his

ears than on his head—“you’re happy to let some poor girl take care of business for you.”

I sigh. “I should tell her. She’ll break purity standards and then …”

“Why? She hasn’t done you any favors.” He tightens his grip on my waist to keep me from pulling away to go to her.

“So? She’s being used.”

“As far as I’ve seen, she’s throwing herself at him,” he says. “Shamelessly, I might add.”

“You have a point. It just feels wrong.”

“She’s hoping to move up,” he says. “You all hope there’s some way to rise in the ranks or to escape. The sooner she learns there isn’t, the better.”

His cold response sucks the air out of me. He may have been talking about Pryana, but he knew I was thinking the same thing.

“Don’t be offended.” He takes my chin in his hand and draws my face up until our eyes meet. I can see the red of my hair flaming in his deep blue eyes. “You aren’t throwing yourself at a fat, old letch.”

“But you know I would take any opportunity to escape,” I whisper.

“The difference,” he says, matching his voice to mine, “is that you’re smart enough to realize a ploy like that won’t work. You’d have a plan.”

I blush and turn my face out of his hand so he can’t see my embarrassment.

“In fact,” he murmurs, leaning against my hair, “I can’t wait to see what you’ll try.”

“Try?” I ask innocently.

“To escape,” he clarifies, and I stiffen in his arms. “No, don’t worry. If you can get out, more power to you. No one ever has before.”

“Perhaps because they depended on men to do it?” I offer, and look up to see his mouth split into a wide grin.

“See what I mean?” He laughs and pulls me closer. “You’re already smarter than every girl here.”

“Including Maela?” I spy her out of the corner of my eye, chatting animatedly with a gentleman at the bar. I’m glad she’s otherwise engaged.

“Especially Maela,” he says, and sighs. “She’s not an intellectual. She acts on her whims.”

“She must have had a rough childhood.”

“Yes,” he says solemnly, “there was a serious lack of puppies.”

I laugh and settle against his chest, glad I’m smart enough not to be cozied up to a drunk old man, but wondering exactly what I’m getting myself into with a charming young one.

Enora’s voice hissing in my ear pulls me away from the moment. “Come with me now.”

As she drags me away, I shoot Erik an apologetic look. Without wasting any time, Enora pulls me into the powder room.

“What are you thinking?” she demands.

“I don’t—”

But she cuts me off with a finger and throws open the door to the toilet. It’s vacant, so she crosses over to the main door and locks it.

“Now?” I ask.

“Yes,” she snaps.

I fold my arms over my bare chest. “I’m not sure what you mean.” Except, of course, I am.

“Don’t play dumb. It doesn’t suit you.”

“I wasn’t aware that I couldn’t dance.”

“Of course you can dance,” she responds irritably. “You can dance with the old officials. You can even dance with a young one if his wife will let you.”

“But Erik is off-limits because he’s unmarried?”

“No, he’s off-limits because he’s Maela’s,” she says, throwing up her hands. She’s not usually so dramatic. “And in case you missed it, she already hates you.”

“No, I caught that.” The fun I was having moments ago leaks away. “And what do you mean ‘he’s Maela’s’?”

“Adelice, I know you aren’t stupid.”

“Let’s pretend I am.”

“Fine. She’s in love with Erik. He was some nobody who came to work in the kitchen a few years ago, but then Maela adopted him.” Her voice shakes with panic, not rage.

“She’s ten years older than him. At least.”

She shoots me another exasperated look. “Back off before she takes even more of an interest in you.”

“I was just dancing with him,” I argue, not sure even I believe it. “It’s that or let some creepy Guild official paw me all night.”

“Ad,” she pleads, “I sympathize, I really do, and Erik is very charming, but there are two things you need to consider. The first is how angry Maela will be if she finds out.”

“And the second?”

“That Erik’s intentions aren’t necessarily as honorable as he makes it seem.”

I blush. “Look, I know we aren’t allowed to get married, and I know there are limits, but I never thought …”

“That,” she says pointedly, “is not what I’m talking about. You’re cozying up to Maela’s assistant. You don’t find it suspicious that he’s taken an interest in you?”

“Well, I do now.” How had this not occurred to me? Since our trip together, I’d started to trust him without even realizing it.

“You’re already walking a thin line—the way you ran and the attention you’re drawing to yourself. Arras doesn’t work this way, Adelice. Secrets—”

“Don’t have a place here.” It bursts viciously out of my mouth.

But instead of being annoyed, she titters wryly. “No, there are plenty of secrets here, believe me, but some of us realize the danger of flaunting them.”

I open my mouth to protest, but she raises her hand to stop me.

“Let me finish. I don’t want to be another person trying to control you __”

“Then don’t!” I yell. “You aren’t my mom.”

“I’m not trying to replace your mother. No one can do that,” she says in a quiet voice.

“No,” I retort. “Not even the Guild.”

Enora backs away from me. She opens her mouth to speak but closes it again as if she can’t find the right words. We both know there are no right words when it comes to what the Guild did to my family.

“I have to get back before they notice I’m gone.” Enora reaches out a hand as if to comfort me but thinks better of it and heads out to the party.

I take my time going back to the ball, afraid I’ll cry in front of the Stream crews. When I’m sure I’m calm enough, I slip out of the

bathroom, still trying to decide how to dump Erik so I can sneak to my room and rip open a pillow, when a pair of strong hands pulls me away from the busy banquet room and into the dark hall.

“I thought I’d been left to fend off drunk old men,” Erik says, quietly, to avoid sending an echo down the empty marble hallway.

“The Guild officials are getting broad-minded,” I murmur, the ache in my chest suddenly spreading to where his hands hold my bare arms.

“Come on, I want to show you something.” He slips his fingers through mine, and against my better judgment, I follow him.

“Erik, I don’t think this is a good idea.”

“Let me guess.” He laughs good-naturedly. “Enora was warning you that Maela will put your head on a spike if she catches us together?”

Something about the casual way he says this makes me feel silly for listening to her.

“Why do you think I’m pilfering you away tonight?” he asks earnestly.

Enora’s warning about his intentions echoes in my head. “I’m not sure.”

“Because Maela is too busy to notice, and by this point everyone else is too tipsy to watch you.”

“So it’s true then?” I ask breathlessly. “I’m still being watched.”

“Of course you are,” he says. “We all are, but on nights like this security is busy keeping Spinsters to their purity obligations, and I told them I would keep an eye on you.”

Another reason I shouldn’t be here with him now.

“Where are we going anyway?” I ask as he leads me down another empty corridor.

“We’re here.” He drops my hand and dramatically opens two large wooden doors directly in front of us.

The moon casts a faint silver glaze on the flowers and sparkles at us from the cobbled walkway that leads into the heart of the garden I walked through on my first day of orientation. I’ve rarely been outside since my arrival here, and then only under close supervision. Right now Erik is anything but a chaperone.

He offers his arm and sweeps me toward the center of the garden. “Care to dance away from those prying eyes?”

There’s no music, but he leads me elegantly into a waltz. His blond hair glows in the dim starshine, and he looks like he belongs here in the cool night.

“You haven’t asked me why I’m doing this yet,” he whispers in my ear.

I have to swallow against the frantic pulse in my throat to speak. “Will you tell me the truth?”

“Possibly,” he says. “Although I’m not sure you are ever supposed to tell a lady the truth.”

“You won’t know until you try,” I argue.

“Okay, I like smart girls,” he tells me. “And a smart girl who’s also gorgeous—how can I resist?”

I rest my head on his shoulder so he won’t see how much I like this information, even if he’s probably lying.

“So is that why you’re with Maela?” I ask, my face still turned from his.

He snorts at this. “With Maela? That woman does not know when to let go.”

“You haven’t …” I’m not sure I want a straight answer even if he’ll give it.

“She never understood how it works,” he says. “She’s not as bright as you are.”

I think about Enora’s warning and try to pull away from him. “Erik, I’m already on Maela’s bad side. There’s no need to make it worse.”

“You have to remember she controls me too.” For a moment he sounds sincere but then the arrogance returns. “We may never get another chance.” But underneath his sense of entitlement, there’s a subtle fear hidden in his eyes, and it looks familiar. It reminds me of the way my father looked as he dragged me to the tunnel. I cling to Erik a little tighter, remembering how easily people can slip away.

“It doesn’t matter. We have a little fun now and Maela finds out and does something awful to one of us, or both of us, and for what?” I force myself to pull out of Erik’s grasp and look him in the eyes. “There’s no future for us.”

“Look, you can play the innocent with everyone else, but not me.” His voice is low but earnest. “I know Maela is watching you. She thinks

you’re dangerous, which means you are.”

“Maela thinks she’s the center of the world. I wouldn’t put too much stock in her opinions.”

“She’s scared of you,” he says.

“Why? I’m not her problem anymore.”

“I don’t know.” Erik sighs. Clearly he’d hoped I’d open up more. “It has to be something that happened at your testing. She’s been different ever since you arrived.”

“Oh, she wasn’t a psycho before?”

Erik shakes his head and the moonlight bounces off his golden hair. “No, that’s nothing new. I thought I’d have to kill you when you first got here.”

I groan. This is so unfair. “She really hates me.”

“No,” he says, “the Guild executes any girl who runs. Standard no-tolerance policy. When she had me sedate you, I assumed—”

“And you would have done it,” I accuse him.

“It’s not that simple.”

“I wasn’t really running,” I admit. “My parents were trying to hide me.”

“Doesn’t matter,” Erik says, unshaken by the confession. “They would kill you *and* your family then.”

“Why?” The word forms on my lips but no sound comes out.

“A girl who tries to escape or run with her family after testing can never be loyal enough to trust. Runners rarely ever make it to the Coventry after they’re caught, but Maela lives for gossip, so I hear about it when one does. It seems to happen frequently in the Western Sector. People whose parents hide them—whose parents try to cheat the testing process—have poisoned minds.

“And the girls who come willingly *are* loyal?” I demand.

“Of course. The Guild controls their families, Adelice,” he says. “Not many question, and those who do—”

“What happens to them?”

Erik shakes his head.

“Is that why they watch us? Me?” I ask flatly. “Because my parents are dead and my kid sister wouldn’t recognize me? Because they have nothing to hold over me?”

“Maybe,” Erik admits, and I hit him hard in the chest. I hate him for telling me the truth. I hit him again and again, and he lets me. Finally my hands hurt from hitting the mass of his solid chest, and I crumble against him. For a long time we say nothing and I pace my breathing to his; our chests rise and fall rhythmically, a promise of normalcy.

“Adelice,” he whispers, still holding me perfectly still. “I wouldn’t count on them both being dead.”

My breath catches and blocks all my thoughts from tumbling out.

“The Guild is too smart to kill off a Spinster’s family and expect her to be of service to them, but they’ll make sure that you have almost nothing left,” he warns me, speaking so quietly against my hair I barely hear him.

“They have my sister, Amie.” I force myself to face facts. “They remapped her though.”

“Younger than you?”

“Twelve.”

He furrows his brow. “And your parents—did you see them die?”

The body bag in the dining room flickers into my mind.

“My dad. I know he’s dead,” I say in a hollow voice.

“But they only *told* you they killed your mother?”

A thousand tiny pieces of shattered hope tug together in my chest.

“Wait.” I pull back and meet his eyes. I keep my voice low but everything comes out in a rush. “Are you saying my mother might be alive?”

“Yes, she’s definitely alive.” But he barely gets the words out, because my mouth is on his. I’m kissing him out of joy or maybe panic, but soon the kiss shifts from excitement to something much more serious, and my body molds up against his. His lips move slowly, his hand pressing against the small of my back. I want to weave this moment out and make it last forever. The feeling of my heart racing, the slight taste of wine on his lips, how my hips lock against his.

But Maela has other plans.

TWELVE

WHEN ERIK AND I BREAK from our embrace, Maela is standing several feet away on the small stone path. The moon shines behind her, obscuring her face, but her posture—straight and rigid—tells me all I need to know. Well, almost. I need to know how long she's been there more than anything else. More than I need to know how she feels about the kiss or what she'll do to us now that we've been caught. I have a pretty good idea about that.

"Erik," she says in a calm voice. "I need you to escort a couple of ministers to the guest quarters. All of the valets are busy."

Erik glances over at me, and then back to her. His hand is still on the small of my back, and when he removes it, the bite of night air blows along my bare flesh, making me shiver. He casts a worried look my way, but turns to Maela. "I'll escort Adelice to her apartment first."

"I think you've given her enough attention this evening," Maela murmurs, stepping forward. As she does, the shadows fade off her face, and I see that she's crying.

I never thought I'd feel sorry for her, especially if I was ever lucky enough to hurt her. But her running mascara makes me want to shrink back and hide among the vines and branches.

"Were you following me?" he demands.

"I needed you," she says quietly.

"There are fifty other guards in there," he says, shaking his head. "You don't own me. I work for you."

Her nostrils flare at the cruelty of his words, and even I feel their sting. *This is getting awkward.*

"You wouldn't be here if not for me," she reminds him. "You'd be stuck slaving in the kitchen or rotting on some boat trying to fish for a living. So unless you want to go back there, I expect you to see the ministers upstairs. Adelice can find her own way back."

At the mention of his past, he's not willing to press it further, and he disappears into the wild, black silhouette of the trees without another

word to her—or to me.

Maela isn't moving. I consider my options. I can try to leave, but I will have to pass her, which will put me within arm's reach, and I'm not altogether comfortable with that idea. Or I can strike up a conversation, but nothing is running through my head except the feeling of Erik's lips, and she's not going to want to discuss that. The third option is to stare her down, and since that's the least dangerous one it's what I do.

"Good night, Adelice," Maela says, turning away from me. "The party is still going on, but I've had enough." Without another word she withdraws along the path that Erik took.

When I get back to the hall, Erik is busy gathering up drunk politicians, and I try to avoid catching his attention. Things are complicated enough at the moment. Maela is nowhere to be seen and neither is Enora. Good. I don't need a night in the cells or a lecture right now. All I need is a bed.

Whether it's from the relief of having hope that my mother is alive or a bit too much wine, I slip into a deep sleep as soon as I hit the sheets, but what seems like moments later I'm shaken awake. It takes me a while to adjust to the sight of a panic-stricken Enora hovering over me.

"What time is it?" I croak against a dry, scratchy throat.

"It's four in the morning," she says in a rush. I wonder—mostly coherently—why she's here so early.

"Okay," I mumble, and try to roll out of her reach.

"This is serious," she hisses. "Maela will have someone here for you in a few minutes. I don't have much time."

Erik. He's on his way to my room. I bolt up in bed and brush the hair out of my face.

"Here." Enora shoves a dress into my hands. "Put this on. You won't want to be wearing that."

I look down and realize I'm still in the silk gown from the party. I quickly yank it off. There's no time to tell her I need underwear, so I slip the new dress on, feeling awkward and vulnerable.

"Give me your hands," she demands, grabbing them herself when I'm not fast enough. A moment later she brushes my fingertips with clear gloss. "This will help, but it won't keep you from feeling it."

“Feeling what?” I ask slowly, but before she can reply Maela’s brutish guard with the shaved head walks in. I’m relieved and disappointed.

“Enora.” He tips his head to her in greeting. “Maela needs Adelice for a special testing.”

“Wait,” I say, even though he’s not speaking to me. “I thought I was done with testing.”

They share a look that sends stomach acid into my throat.

“Occasionally,” Enora says in measured syllables, “we are tested spontaneously. It is a chance to see how you perform under pressure.” Her expression reminds me of the one on my mother’s face before she fled into the tunnel. She’s lost, no matter what she does, and it drags down her eyes in sadness.

Instinctively I fling my arms around her and bury myself in her neck. Enora’s arms are warm and strong, and I want them to be my mom’s. “Your soul is your own,” she whispers into my hair. “Don’t let them take that. No matter what they do.”

Words will betray me and allow the tears to come, so I smile bravely as I pull away from her and follow the burly guard without asking more questions. Turning one last time, I see the concerned look on Enora’s face, but she quickly replaces it with a smile when our eyes meet. We both know this testing isn’t spontaneous or an evaluation of my progress. This is a new punishment.

My fingertips are hard like rocks where Enora painted them with the clear lacquer. I can still feel them but as I press them together, the nails bend back. But the skin is numb where she brushed the gloss.

“Word to the wise,” the guard offers in a gruff voice. “Don’t do that.”

“What?” I ask.

“That,” he says, and his eyes dart to my fingertips. “You’ll get her in trouble for helping you.”

A slow aching chill spreads out through my chest and down into my arms and legs. What have I gotten myself into?

“Is Erik okay?” I ask, trying to sound casual. “He usually escorts me to these things.”

“Yeah.” The guard snorts. “Maela has switched up assignments for the time being. He’ll be sticking closer to her in the future.”

This news doesn’t surprise me, but it still hurts. Erik might have been a friend, and even if his intentions weren’t exactly noble, he made me laugh. And then there was the kiss. Something I don’t know how to deal with.

The halls are quiet. No hint of a party lingers—even the late-nighters must be in bed. What kind of punishment takes place at four in the morning? The kind no one can know about. Enora warned me this would happen if I hung around Erik, but I didn’t listen.

My new guard leads me up to two swinging doors and holds one open. “I’m Darius, by the way,” he informs me, and as soon as I’m through the door, he’s gone.

Swollen white plastic covers the walls of the stark studio. One window. One loom. One person. Maela’s already there, fully dressed. And I have no underwear on. She must keep her aesthetician locked in her bathroom. But when she turns, I see she has no cosmetics applied. Her face is softer, lacking the harsh angles rouge and liner give it. She looks average, maybe even pretty, but her eyes are the same: cold and hateful.

“On occasion,” she says, “we are required to perform an unexpected test on a new Spinster. A few Guild officials expressed concern over your readiness to start Crewel work. As you know, this work is of the utmost importance, and it’s my duty to assure them you are ready.”

“Which officials?” I ask, calling her bluff.

She smiles, unfazed. “Don’t worry about that. The important thing is that you focus on completing the task I have for you.”

“Have you spoken with Cormac?”

“I don’t have to approve training activities with Cormac,” she says, staring out the window.

“Loricel?” I ask, wondering if she’s approved this.

“She isn’t interested in the rest of us,” Maela spits. “And at her advanced age, she’s been in bed for hours.”

I nod and mentally sort through all the comebacks I could make. In the end, I opt for silence.

“Spinning is delicate work,” she purrs, and I notice for the first time how quiet the room is without the hum of the loom. “I know you are aware of that.”

I feel my jaw tighten. All I've ever seen is Maela mutilating Arras—and she's going to give me tips?

"You must approach your work with precision and delicacy, regardless of what is going on beyond this room," she continues. "We call this a stress test."

She turns, but looks past me, and I follow her gaze. For the first time I notice a large oak loom with thick steel strands stretched across it. It's nothing like the modern automated machines I've been training on. There's a crudeness to it. The wood is warped and scratched, and the small bench that accompanies it is made of a solid piece of unfinished tree stump. This isn't going to be comfortable.

"If you are gentle, you can weave anything," she murmurs, beckoning me to take a seat on the stump. "How else can a Spinster weave time? It's so precious. Once we had no control over time. It slipped right through our fingers. No power over death or famine or disease. And then science gave us weaving. But if we are not careful we could lose the control we have now."

I've had enough of this patronizing charade. "Is this because of what happened between Erik and me?"

Maela's nostrils flare and she moves away from me. "This exercise," she continues, bypassing my question altogether, "will teach you delicacy and control."

She leans toward the loom and deftly, but very softly, fingers a steel line. It pings as she releases it. Taking a thin wirelike thread, she gracefully weaves it through the steel cables on the loom. In. Out. In. Out. Until she yelps and draws her index finger up to her mouth, wincing.

I want to ask her what's wrong, but it seems bad form since we're enemies and everything, so I wait until she removes her finger. Blood blossoms from a small cut, and the nature of this test becomes clear.

"This spool," she says, holding a large metal cylinder out to me, "needs to be woven through by noon."

"That's it?" I ask suspiciously, afraid to take the thread from her. Light glints off its coils.

"That's it." She presses her lips together in a smirk. "By noon, or you'll be reassigned."

“I assume the ministers will need to see my work.”

Her jaw flexes under her skin, but she maintains her composure. “Naturally.”

“Naturally,” I agree.

She leaves the room, and I gingerly touch the “thread.” It’s razor sharp. Even more carefully, I reach out to feel the steel bands that comprise the warp of the loom. They’re almost totally rigid. Razor wire and a fake loom. She’s outdone herself this time. I’ll be lucky to have fingers at the end of this.

My first pass goes through easily and I avoid cutting my fingertips. It makes me overconfident, and the next pass slices off the tip of my left index finger. Tears sting my eyes as air hits the open flesh. This is no minor wound, but Maela is looking for any excuse to banish to me to kitchen work or worse, so I pull on the cylinder until I have enough slack to reach the hem of my skirt and use the wire to slice a few inches off it. Cutting several smaller pieces, I wrap each of my fingers, starting with my bleeding pointer. I’ll have to adjust to my clumsy covered fingers, but I can’t leave them exposed.

It’s slow work. Occasionally the wire catches on the tops of my hands and leaves angry streaks of blood across them, but I press on, fighting against the growing pulse from the wounds. The makeshift bandages last for a while, until the one covering my bloodied finger is soaked through and the others are in tatters. The sun is rising in the east window, and I have five hours left at most, but the spool looks untouched. Taking a deep breath, I peel off the fabric covers, except the one blocking my bleeding left index finger, and grip the wire firmly between my right index finger and thumb.

I focus on breathing, filling my lungs completely with each inhale and then slowly releasing. Bleeding welts cover my hands, but I press on, ignoring the dizzy, light-headed feeling. And between my body expecting breakfast—stupid set mealtimes—and dripping blood everywhere, my mind drops into oblivion.

The lack of noise in the room roars in my ears, or maybe it’s my heartbeat. There’s no clock, only the faint glow of morning light breaking in patches on my work. It reflects back off the white plastic-covered walls, heating them, so their synthetic stench fills the air in the studio,

making my stomach hurt. Everything is bright, blinding in its artifice. Only my warm blood on the cold, steel lines contrasts with the harsh brilliance of the space. But despite the searing pain, I get through three-quarters of the spool before Maela returns.

She smiles at the sight of my wounded hands. “You have two hours left, Adelice.” Leaning over my work, she continues, “I was thinking about how rude it was for us not to give you more updates on your sister.”

I lose my careful grip on the wire and slice a fresh cut into my palm.

“It’s common for us to allow a letter or to provide some information during the initial training,” she says, still hovering over me. “But we generally don’t do that for traitors.”

“Yes, I’m aware of what you do for traitors,” I say.

“Then you already know we can be merciful,” she replies innocently. I want to wrap the wire around her thin, pale neck.

“Unfortunately, your parents committed treason, and of course there was the issue of the contraband found in your house,” she tells me, “so your parents have been removed.”

“Cormac told me,” I respond. But even though I already knew, I feel the heat of tears when I blink. I have no energy to fight them.

“I see. You also know that your sister, as a minor, was rewoven. You know she’s in Cypress, where many of our finest Eligibles are found each year. As she probably shares your talent, she’s likely to prove useful to us in the future. We’re keeping a very close eye on her.”

“Amie doesn’t have any skill,” I murmur, willing it to be true. “You’re wasting your time.”

“Not at all,” Maela assures me as she lights a cigarette. “We need to keep track of her for you. The Guild’s newest prize needs to be kept happy.”

“Doesn’t matter to me. I barely knew her,” I lie. “We’re not very close in age, and she was always more concerned with being popular and keeping up on the current phases.” As soon as it’s out of my mouth, I want to swallow it back.

But I can tell from the way Maela’s eyebrow shoots up that this info delights her. “You two are different then. Maybe she’ll have what she

needs to succeed as a Spinster when her time comes, if that's what she wants."

Wants? I hesitate. "And her new family?" I think of the paranoid look in her adoptive mother's eyes.

"You saw her new mother. They're an excellent, loyal family," she says. "There are an unfortunate number of couples who are childless, so orphans are often rewoven into other sections to those deserving people."

The wire's buried half an inch in my thumb before I realize how hard I'm clenching it. I don't know why I'm stopping myself. No one would miss Maela.

"Thanks for the update. I have a lot left to do." I force myself to return to the work, and I hear the soft click of the door closing behind her.

When Maela saunters into the room at noon, she practically chokes on her cigarette to find me done. "I guess I didn't give you enough thread," she says in a low voice. "You look like you got bored."

"Maybe I'm as talented as you don't want me to be," I counter, keeping my eyes level with hers and ignoring the woozy shakiness spreading through my body. If she thought her diversion would sidetrack me, she was mistaken. "Will someone be coming to check my work?"

Maela's eyes narrow, but she speaks in a normal voice. "Of course. Later."

"Let me know what they think," I say as arrogantly as I can, while bleeding profusely. My terse new escort takes me back to my quarters, and I try not to drip blood on the high tower's expensive rugs.

There's no one waiting in my room. Not even Enora, who I fully expected to descend on me as soon as I entered. So I let myself cry, my tears washing down along the blood soaking my skirt. I can't bring myself to examine my hands, and a search of my cavernous bathroom yields no medical supplies. I finally call on the companel to ask for bandages and a doctor. Neither request is denied.

An eternity later someone raps at my door. I don't know who it could be. No one knocks here. The maid, kitchen staff, my aestheticians—all of them enter and exit at their convenience. So for the first time I discover my door has a peephole. Peering through the tiny circle of glass I'm greeted by a single electric-blue eye. For a moment, I freeze. It could be

Erik or Jost, and I realize I’m not sure which one of them I want to see more, or if it’s even safe to let either of them in. But finally I take a deep breath and open the door.

THIRTEEN

MAELA WOULDN'T KNOWINGLY SEND me the one person I might be both dying to see and wanting to avoid, but it would be the evil icing on the cake to have Jost attend me. Does he know I'm being punished for kissing Erik? Or maybe he's just been thinking about me, too. The idea that he might want to see me sends my pulse racing so fast that my mutilated fingers throb. Now might not be the time to worry about this. He's seen me looking worse, so I instruct him to come in, anyway. Jost's head is turned away from the open door.

I clear my throat to get his attention. "I'm not naked, you know."

"I'll try to be less polite in the future," he says.

"What are you doing here?" I ask as I gingerly wrap a clean towel around my bleeding hands.

"You sent for medical help." He holds up a small medic bag.

"Exactly. They don't have a clinic here?" Realizing my exasperation might be misinterpreted—because I'd much rather be here with him than on an exam table—I quickly add, "I'm glad you make house calls, but what *is* your job anyway?"

"I do the dirty work, remember? I'm trained to do basic medical patching. If you aren't dying, you get me. The clinic is reserved for other things." His tone implies there's more to the story, but I can't handle any more information right now. I make a mental note to bring this up later when I'm not bleeding profusely.

"So your job is to clean up after me?" I ask, tilting my head to get a better look at him. Unfortunately, the small shift makes me extremely dizzy.

Jost catches me in time. "Exactly."

He helps me to the large floor cushions and takes my hands carefully. His own are warm and rough against my wrist as he inspects mine. His soft touch isn't doing much to help me with the light-headedness, but I could care less.

"Do I want to know what happened?" he asks.

I shake my head. “Maela has taken a shine to me.”

“What happened to a low profile?” Jost asks, with a follow-up groan to seal his disapproval.

“I’m tall.”

Despite his clear frustration, he smiles just a little. “Let’s clean these up. You know we’re going to need to wash this off,” he says, taking my elbow and helping me to my feet. Apparently I’m not funny. But if I couldn’t tease Jost, I wasn’t sure what to do with him.

In the bathroom he turns the faucet on full blast. The rushing water echoes off the marble. “There,” he says, and I give him a quizzical look, but he just takes my hands. Instead of pushing them under the rushing faucet, he cups some water in his left hand and pours it over my wounds, tenderly wiping away the blood. I’m used to people doing things for me by now—my hair and cosmetics, even dressing me—but Jost caring for me reminds me of my mother watching over me when I was ill. The ache spreading in my chest is anything but homesickness though.

Opening the pouch he brought, he takes out a small pot of salve. “This is going to sting.”

“I’ve managed worse.” But as he applies it to the open cuts, I regret my bravado. I have to bite down on my lip to keep from yelping.

“How are you doing?” he asks kindly.

“I’ve been better,” I admit, sucking in a long breath to distract myself. “So the Guild has you healing Spinsters in addition to your valet duties? Exactly why are you here?”

He leans closer to me and whispers against my ear, “Did you think we could talk in your room? I don’t need the build to know why I’m here.”

“I guess I didn’t expect you to give me …” My mind no longer forms full thoughts as his breath hits my neck.

“A real answer?” He pulls back, breaking the spell.

“A controversial one,” I admit finally. “I thought you were a regular working drudge.”

“Thanks,” he says. “That’s only mildly insulting.”

“I’m sorry. It wasn’t supposed to be.”

“I know. I guess I’m better at fitting in than I thought,” he says, wrapping gauze around my cleaned hands. “What’s this?”

He trails a finger along the techprint on my wrist, and I'm not sure what to tell him. "A relic from a past life," I say with a sigh. "My father printed me before …"

Jost tips his head ever so slightly to show he knows and I don't have to say the words, even though they echo and roar in my head: *before he died*.

"Why an hourglass?" he asks, studying the mark.

"I don't know," I murmur, extremely conscious of his touch. "It's supposed to remind me who I am."

"Is it working?" he breathes, staring into my eyes.

"I suppose." I watch him and weigh my thoughts. "Why are you here, Jost? Serving the Coventry, I mean."

"I don't even know how to begin to answer that," he says, starting on my other hand.

"At the beginning?" I suggest quietly. He looks up and his usually bright eyes are hollow.

"I had a family once." He pauses and turns his attention back to my hands. "Now I don't."

The space between us is shrinking, but I'm only now seeing the wide gulf that existed before. "How did it happen?" I ask.

"I was married when I was sixteen to a girl from my town. Our metro doesn't segregate much in the pretesting years, and we made certain she'd be dismissed from eligibility."

I blush at his confession but try to laugh off my discomfort. Something twists in my chest at this revelation. I don't like that he was married. Not one bit. Even if he isn't anymore. "Sixteen? I thought eighteen was bad." As soon as I say it, I regret it.

"Yes, sixteen." And to my relief, he laughs. "I'd known her since we were children. We lived in a small village, Saxun, which straddles the Western and Southern Sectors. I come from a long line of fishermen. It's such a small town that assignments are dictated by family trade, and since my brother got a border pass out of town, I was the only one who could take over my father's boat."

"So you weren't given a role?" The monthly assignment day was a major event in Romen town. Mostly it was for filling any needs in the metro, and occasionally someone might be sent to a neighboring

metrocenter, but once in a while the Guild would fill a position within the coventry or various sector departments, which meant a border pass. It almost always went to a boy, but the whole town lived for the possibility of it. No one missed assignment day.

“You know, if you have a lot of money or none at all, it works differently,” he tells me wryly. “The system doesn’t apply to you in quite the same way.”

“Romen was the third largest town in the Western Sector,” I say. “It was the kind of town where everything was average—houses, assignments, people.”

“The middle is what the Guild thrives on.”

“So, you were married before you came here?” I try to sound casual, but I’m feeling a bit out of my league, and I don’t want him to hear the jealousy in my voice.

He nods and begins to dress my hands. “Her name was Rozenn. She lived with her father and her brother. I was working to buy a new boat and …” He pauses as though skipping past something too painful to share, but he continues, his voice barely audible over the faucet. “I should have known something was wrong, but it never occurred to me.”

I lay a bandaged hand on his shoulder and his rigid muscles soften.

“Her brother, Parrick. He was a loner, unhappy with his assignment, uninterested in girls. Rapidly approaching eighteen. I tolerated him because he became my family when I married Rozenn, but the two were opposites. She was a day in spring. Everything about her was vital. Parrick stuck out the same way, but only because he was cold. He could suck the joy out of a conversation. People didn’t like being around him. I didn’t like being around him,” he admits. “I couldn’t understand why he was so distant and isolated.

“He was supposed to be apprenticing with his father, but he began taking long breaks. One day he disappeared and didn’t return until nightfall. Rozenn was worried her father was losing patience with him, so she asked me to step in. She thought I could talk to Parrick. Maybe befriend him. He didn’t want to talk to me, and I didn’t try very hard. Instead I started following him.”

“Where was he going?” I ask in a low voice, my jealousy giving way to dread.

“He was meeting others—from our town and other metros near us. They talked about change and revolution. I thought about turning them in, but the stories stopped me.”

“Stories?” My voice is barely a whisper.

“Horrible stories. Families wiped out, towns rewoven. They were whispered tales, shared between desperate men. I was conflicted, so I did nothing.” Done with my hands, Jost sits on the edge of the tub. His blue eyes burn like the tip of a flame, looking out past this room into the ruins left behind him.

“Did you tell your wife?” I stumble on the word, and doubt about Jost, about being here now, creeps into my throat and sits like a lump.

Jost shakes his head, but his gaze remains distant. “No, I didn’t want to worry her. I should have, but I was scared to repeat what I had heard. Turns out I was right. There are Spinsters trained to find these plots and anti-Guild groups.”

“Yes, we learned about it in training. The tapestry begins to bleed and stain. When people are loyal, their threads remain true to their original color.”

“I bet Rozenn’s was the most beautiful thread imaginable,” he says with reverence.

Hot tears prick at my eyes when he says her name.

“I wonder what Saxun looked like when they came.”

“I can’t imagine. I’ve never seen a taint,” I admit. “My parents trained me for eight years to fail the testing, and no one came for us. I don’t know how deeply spread the staining has to be before it’s identified.”

“Were your parents openly anti-Guild?”

I shake my head. Despite their actions, I can’t claim them to have been rebels. “No, they never spoke against the Guild. They were very careful about that. And besides, my mother was just a secretary and my father was a mechanic.”

“Was?”

“I wasn’t the only one punished,” I say quietly. “I assumed you knew.”

“I guessed,” he says. “Anyway, the town of Saxun was filled with rebels. Your parents were only two people.”

I think of the tunnels under my house. They had to lead somewhere. There's still a lot I don't know about my parents. "I guess a little treason can be overlooked."

"But only a little," he murmurs.

"Yes." My smile is ragged around the edges. "What happened?"

"The Guild made an example of the town." Jost's voice fades, and I lean in to hear him. "They ripped out our sisters, our mothers, our daughters …"

"Your wives," I add, and he nods.

His head drops and the distance between us is gone. When he speaks again, his words are broken. "I saw it. You have no idea, Adelice. What it's like to see that."

I recall being sent away from my grandmother's room. How the nurse closed the curtain and waited with her back turned as though she couldn't stand to look.

"She was on the dock, waiting with the other women for us to come in for lunch. She just slipped away. First her legs faded, and she looked so confused that I screamed for help, but there was nothing we could do. Those of us on the boats watched it happen. Her mouth disappeared next and she couldn't cry for help. The last thing to fade was her body." He makes a choking noise and I realize he's crying. "She was holding our daughter."

I weep with him. For his loss and for the confusion I feel. This isn't the boy with the crooked grin who fed me sweet potatoes, and my grief isn't just because of what the Guild did to him but because of how different we are. I cry because I'm a stupid girl who can't curb the jealousy and inferiority I feel toward Rozenn for getting him first. And for the distance that will always exist between us. He was a husband, a father, and I'm nothing and never will be. I guess the Guild assigned us our roles after all.

"It was the last time I saw either of them. She was sixteen, and my daughter was three months old."

I have no words to comfort him so I take his hand and hold it softly in my bandaged one.

"I'm here because it's the last place they'll look," he confides, finally answering my question.

“Look for what?” I ask, unsure I want to know the answer.
“Revolution.”

FOURTEEN

I DREAM OF PEOPLE I LOVE. I am five, and my mother puts on cosmetics at the bathroom sink, but every cosmetic detracts instead of enhancing. The mascara erases her lashes, the rouge hollows her cheeks, and the lipstick removes her smile. She brushes her copper-red hair and the locks fade into air. Her decapitated body turns to me and gestures for approval, and she asks, as she did every day: “How do I look?”

Amie is a baby, and I cling to her, but the tighter I hold her, the more she disappears. I can’t protect her. I see her rewoven, now a young girl with wispy blond braids. I wave to her, and she stares through me. I am the one who’s gone. I’m the ghost.

A large white cake the size of a loom rests on a simple table and under it my father melts into a pool of sticky black liquid that oozes closer and closer to my bare feet. He calls for help, but I’m too scared of getting my shoes dirty, so I watch as he fades into nothing.

And in the background of the dreams, Jost stands frozen. Only the blink of his eyes shows that he’s awake and watching, waiting for me to help him. But when I step toward him, I see her, more beautiful than me—laughing and pregnant—holding his hand, and I look away. When I turn, he shifts into Erik, whose free arms stretch out to me, beckoning for me to come to him.

I erase and rebuild the world in my sleep, and in the morning I try to remember how to rebuild myself. Every day I wonder how I can go back to the loom. Can I keep weaving now that I know? I can’t erase Jost’s story. I had nothing to do with it, but that doesn’t change anything. I’m still a Spinster.

Jost comes daily to salve my hands with renewal cream, and they heal quickly, but no stylists come. A week has passed and even Enora is absent, and I wonder if I’ve gotten her in trouble, too. Food continues to arrive at meal hours. I stay in my nightdress, lounging by the fire, and living for the minutes when Jost comes to check on me. Today he brings lunch, and we eat together. The conversation sounds light, but only

because we’re speaking in code. Some of our stories we can share openly, but the things I really want to know can’t be spoken out loud where surveillance might pick up our words. We can only spend so much time in the bathroom—where the sound of running water hides our voices—without raising alarm, but despite my attempts to steer all conversation toward his plans, he seems more interested in me.

“It wasn’t a real fight.” I laugh as I continue a story about my neighbor Beth. “She was bullying Amie, and I was tired of it. So I sort of knocked her over.”

“But you loved your kid sister, right?” Jost presses. “It sounds like you two got into trouble a lot.”

“Amie followed the rules better than I did, so when I did anything that could get us in trouble, she freaked out,” I say. “When I fought with Beth she worried that I’d be taken away for deviance counseling.”

“But you weren’t,” he says.

“I wasn’t, but Beth was.” I had forgotten that until now. It was one of those memories that stuck in your head although you tried to push it back and ignore it. Beth had gone away when we were twelve, and when she came back, she was different. Just as unfriendly, but not with me—with everyone.

“My big brother was only ten months older than me,” he says, calling me back to the conversation. “My mom called us hooligans.”

I smile at that, but then my eyes widen as I do the math. “Ten months?”

His grin gets a little more crooked. “Not a lot to do in a poor fishing village.”

I know more about babies and stuff than most girls my age. Well, I guess the other girls in Romen would have started marriage-preparation courses now. That’s where they tell you about sex. Of course, my parents told me about the birds and the bees in excruciating and embarrassing detail years ago. Another one of their best-laid plans to make sure I understood my world. But sitting here with a guy who makes me tingle all over, in the Coventry where the “privileges of marriage,” as my mom had called them, were way off-limits, that info was pretty useless. And then there was the fact that he had firsthand experience that I would never have. It was definitely time for a change in conversation.

“So you were a hunter?” I ask, returning back to our code and carelessly scooping rice into my mouth, my bandaged hands still proving a nuisance to fine motor skills—and forks.

Jost nods, serious again. “I was interested in large game. The kind that feeds a lot of people and brings in money.”

“What kinds of animals constitute large game?” I keep my voice casual. No companel would detect anything unusual—or even interesting—this way.

“Bears and cougars, mostly.”

“You can eat bears and cougars?” I screw up my face in mock disgust.

“Ad, you can eat anything if you’re hungry enough.” Jost grins over a chicken leg.

The conversation falters, and we lapse into silence as we eat. Hunger is not an issue to discuss, even in code. It borders on treason, because the Guild claims there is no hunger. I lived on the borders of a large metro with my family and both my parents were assigned work, so although our meal rations were never exciting, we didn’t want. Jost, however, worked hard for his food and many in his small village went without, save for the kindness of the fishermen, but even that was limited to what was left after they had delivered their quotas to the Guild.

But of course Jost never hunted a day in his life. He worked fifteen-hour days to feed his family and a handful of neighbors, but at sea. I know this because during the brief distractions we can call up, we’ve established a few code words. It’s been trial and error, with more than a few misunderstandings, but we’re getting better at the double talk. The bears are ministry officials and cougars are Spinsters. Jost is looking for who is responsible for the attacks on the women of Saxun. What he’s planning to do when he finds out, we haven’t figured out a code for, and I’m not sure I care to know.

“Did you ever have a cougar attack a stag?” I’m trying to ask about Erik, but no matter how many ways I ask, Jost has no clue what I’m saying.

“I’m sure one did,” he says, giving me a slight shrug to let me know he’s sorry he doesn’t understand. If only my questions were as easy to follow as his body language.

And that’s when I realize the solution to our problem. It’s so simple, it never occurred to me. “Jost, is sight or sound more important when hunting?” I ask excitedly.

“What do you mean?”

“If you were hunting, would you want to see or hear your prey?”

He understands and gives me a slight nod. “Sight is good, but most prefer being able to hear.”

So there it is: the Coventry *listens* in private quarters but, unlike in the studios, doesn’t *watch*. At least, that’s what Jost thinks, and he knows a lot about how things work here. Now I know what to do if I can manage it, but it means breaking a promise.

“Well, thank you for bringing me my lunch,” I tell him, and lead him to the door. He follows, but it’s clear he doesn’t understand. Most of the food is finished, but he usually stays longer. When I open the door and then shut it noisily before he can leave, he stays silent, waiting for me to make my point. I gesture toward the rug in front of the fire. He walks to it, and I follow behind him, concentrating hard on the strands in the room until they glimmer around me, revealing the room’s weave. The time and matter are knit closely together, and I have to focus on the golden bands of light until I’m sure I can pinpoint just the time threads. It’s so much easier to see on the loom, but at least time always moves across, so I can find it if I look closely enough. Slowly I reach out with my wounded fingers and pull the strands and twist. The fire in the hearth roars up and crackles in the room so loudly it fills my ears. A chill dampens the air around us despite the climate control being on. I weave the tangled time into a web of golden light, and it domes us in a shimmering glow, stopping at the rug under our feet. We can still see the fire and the room through the translucent web, but we no longer hear the crackle of the logs, and the licking flames seem to slow until they are frozen, like a picture, when I connect the last bits of twisted gold.

“What did you do?” he whispers.

“I wove another moment.” I’m as surprised as he is that it worked. “I wasn’t sure I could.” This is what I’d done at testing. Slipped, and caught the weave of the actual room, not the one they’d given us on the loom, and messed it up a little. I’d smoothed it right back out, but that was all it took. I’d been studying the weave around me for years, enough to know

that what I'd done would be noticed by the proctors administering the test. But I'd never considered how I could use this skill until now.

"What does that mean?" he asks, reaching out toward the golden web, but pulling back before his hands touch it.

"I don't know," I admit.

"Can they hear us?"

"I don't think so." Biting my lip, I gesture for him to be silent and then carefully pull the strands separating us from the nearby fire. It roars back to life. I quickly reweave them, and it stops again.

"It's frozen," he murmurs in disbelief. "But how?"

"This moment exists outside of that reality. I can't really explain it." But he's staring at me like I'm a freak. I don't blame him. It's not supposed to work this way. "I know you are supposed to need a loom to weave, but I can see the weave without one."

From the way he falls back in surprise, I can guess he's decided that I'm definitely a freak.

"Have you always been able to do this?" he asks.

"Not exactly like this, but I've been able to weave since I was a child."

"Without a loom?" he asks in awe.

"Yes."

"So you messed up the room?" I can tell he's having a hard time with this. I barely understand it myself.

"These," I say, fingering the strands of light, "are time. They always move across the weave. I guess it's because time flows forward."

"Can it be moved backward?" he asks quietly, and I know what he's thinking.

I shake my head no. As much as I wish I could turn back the weave and save my parents, for the first time part of me is glad I can't. If I could take Jost back to save his family, would I? It's not a decision I want to face.

"But how do you do it without the loom?" he asks, trying to hide his disappointment. "How can you even see it?"

"I wish I knew," I say with a hollow chuckle. "Maybe then I wouldn't be in this mess."

"Do they know this?"

I pause, because I’m not sure. Cormac says they saw me do it at testing, but I’ve been careful not to manipulate without a loom here. I don’t share all this with Jost though. “Enora told me not to tell them.”

Jost lets out a low whistle as he paces the small dome, inspecting it as closely as he can without touching it. “Enora is smart. What would happen if someone came into the room right now?”

“That’s just it,” I explain. “They couldn’t. That moment”—I point to the room outside my woven moment—“is frozen.”

“So we could stay here,” he says slowly, “and no matter how much time passes here, no time would pass out there.”

“Exactly.” I pause, realizing I don’t know this for sure. “I think. Actually, I have no idea.”

“Then it’s true.”

I look at him, trying to understand what he’s telling me.

“There are whisperings that Loricel’s successor has come. Everyone has been trying to figure out which of you it is,” he explains. “If it’s you or the other one.”

“Pryana?” I ask, mildly offended.

Jost nods, too busy gawking to notice. “I’ve known it was you since they threw you in the cell.”

“But how did they know?” Was one slip enough to mark me as a Creweler?

“I don’t know,” he admits, “but the way they treat you—afraid of you, but still deferential. They know it’s you.”

I think of the threats made but never carried out.

“Crewelers don’t come along often. They can’t afford to lose you,” Jost tells me.

“But how is this Crewel work?” I finger the time woven around us. “Loricel has only ever used a loom in my presence.”

“Crewelers don’t merely embroider.” Jost sits down on the rug, and I join him, safely cocooned in my moment. “Once a year Loricel visits the mining sites and separates the elements from time, so the machines can purify and distribute the material to the coventries to maintain Arras’s weave. I serve at the meetings when the officials come to schedule the trips. Without her talent, the looms would be useless. That’s why she gives them so much grief.” There’s a note of appreciation in his voice.

“In academy, they told us machines discovered the elements.”

“You don’t feel like a machine?” he asks. “Oiled and maintained and made to do the will of those who control you?”

I don’t answer. I have no response except to warn him, but even that sounds mechanical and automatic. “You can’t tell anyone.”

“I won’t,” he promises. “But they already know.”

“They think they know,” I argue.

“They know, Adelice.”

*

The dreams are more vivid, but I control them now. I repaint my mother’s eyes and weave my sister back into my arms. My father, taken so violently, remains unsaved. I continue to try. Meanwhile, Jost and Erik take turns watching me, and I wake with their eyes burned into my conscious thoughts.

By the time Enora finally shows up to brief me, I’m seriously considering weaving myself right out of the compound. This time there are no pleasantries or small talk. Instead she gets right to the point.

“As you know, the Guild has made unprecedented advances in mind-mapping technology.” Her voice is as stiff as her posture. There’s no spark of friendliness. I must have really gotten her into trouble for her to act like this.

“And they will be utilizing this new capability by mapping every Spinster,” she continues.

“What?” I shout, jumping up from my bed.

Enora barely bats an eyelash at my outburst. “Since Spinsters have unique abilities that are vital to the continued prosperity of Arras, the Guild is mandating that all Spinsters undergo this testing.”

“At the State of the Guild they said they could change people. Are they mapping us or remapping us?” I ask, studying Enora’s placid demeanor. Something isn’t right.

“Don’t be ridiculous,” she says, but her eyes are empty. “You can’t remap something that hasn’t been mapped.” There’s no familiarity in her voice, and her usual maternal tone is now mocking.

“So is that why they’re doing it? So they can remap us?”

“It would be foolish to remap a Spinster. All attempts to do so in the past have resulted in loss of weaving ability,” she says.

I remember Cormac telling me that they almost had the technology perfected to clean and splice an individual’s strand. Either Enora doesn’t know that or she’s lying to me. I rub my hands together and stare at her. Why is she acting like this?

“My hands are almost better,” I say, holding them out for her to see the bandages.

“I’m relieved to hear that,” she says without even a small smile.

“Enora, did something happen?” I whisper, hoping the companels can’t hear me.

“I’m fine, Adelice,” she says with a blink. “I was sick but the Guild doctors have helped me, and now I’m fine.”

She’s not though. Nothing is right about this. My Enora would be fawning over my hands and lecturing me right now. She wouldn’t have stayed away the whole week. This woman is like a talking shell of Enora.

“What was wrong with you?” I ask.

“Anxiety issues. I was having strange urges, so naturally I spoke to Loricel and she got me into the clinic right away.”

This knocks the wind out of me, and my mouth falls open, but I quickly shut it. Loricel—why would she hurt Enora?

“What kinds of urges were you having?” I ask, trying to steady my breathing.

“Unnatural ones,” she says, as though this requires no further explanation.

“Have you been mapped yet?”

“Oh, yes. You and Pryana will be the last of the Spinsterhood to be mapped. We did it by seniority,” Enora says, folding her hands in her lap and smiling.

“Even Loricel?”

“I don’t know. I don’t have access to the list,” she says. “Although Loricel should have been the first to go.”

First to go. Is that why she hasn’t visited me? Why she didn’t step in when Maela punished me? Did a new Loricel do this to Enora?

“When am I scheduled?”

“Friday,” she says. “It is quite painless.”

“I’m sure it is,” I say automatically.

The door to my quarters opens, and Jost appears with a silver tray.

“Enora,” he calls, “will you be dining with Adelice?”

“No, I’m expected in the dining hall,” she tells him. “I was leaving.”

She nods once at me, then exits. I’m still staring after her when Jost sets down the tray and clears his throat. Snapping to it, I freeze the time, creating a bubble around us, then turn to face him.

“Am I imagining it or is something different about Enora?” he asks, his eyebrows knit in concern.

“You’re definitely not imagining it.” I sigh, trying to piece together the information.

Jost gestures for my hands, and we settle down on the cushions. He removes the bandages and inspects my fingertips. Even I have to admit the renewal cream has worked wonders.

“I think you’re done with these,” he says, tossing the bandages to the side.

“Oh,” I say, trying hard to hide my disappointment. If I’m healed, there’s no reason for him to keep coming to see me.

“I thought that might be the case,” he says. “So I made a special lunch.”

“You cooked this?” I ask in amazement.

“No,” he says sheepishly. “The food generators did most of the work, but I chose the dishes and laid them out.”

“It’s perfect.”

I eat with my hands. I love the feeling of the foods—greasy, slick, rough, creamy. Jost laughs and shovels violet berries into my mouth. I wonder whether he still loves Rozenn. The shame of the thought creeps hot onto my cheeks, and he stops feeding me the berries.

“Ready to get back to work?” he asks.

“I guess I have to now.”

“You could stay in here,” he says, his eyes traveling along the perimeter of the bubble.

“And miss all the fun when Security realizes why you’ve been visiting me every day?” I tease.

“I’d stay with you,” he says in a quiet voice.

There are a million things I want to say to Jost at this moment, but the only thing that comes out is the question that's been burning through my mind since he said the word *revolution*. "What are you planning?"

"It's not that simple," he says.

"Forget it. It's not my place to ask."

"I'm sorry. It's just that …" Jost pauses, struggling for the word.

"You don't trust me," I say. "It's okay, you have no reason to."

"I trust you, Adelice. Please know that." He reaches over and cups my face, his palm searing my already warm cheekbone. "I thought I would never trust anyone again."

"You aren't alone," I murmur, turning my head into his outstretched palm. He sighs.

"I know," he says, but it's more a confession than a realization. "Ad, you aren't the only person who knows why I'm here."

It takes a moment for this to sink in, but when it does I whip my head up to meet his eyes. "How many people know?"

"Now? Two. You and one other," he admits, lowering his rejected hand to rest on my leg. My nerves pulse along my thigh where he's touching me.

"Who?" I ask, trying to ignore the tingle running through my lower half.

Jost shakes his head. "I'm sorry. That isn't my secret to share."

"But you said I was the only one you trusted," I press.

"I don't trust this person," he says.

"But you're working together?"

"No, we're definitely not working together, but this person knows why I came to the Coventry." He pauses before adding, "It wouldn't be a good idea for us to work together."

"But this person is a revolutionary?"

"No," he rushes to answer.

"But they know why you're here? Will they inform on you?" I feel confused by the vague turn this conversation has taken. I'm getting answers, but the kind that only lead to more questions.

"I'm not worried they'll tell on me." He looks away to signal he won't say anything else.

I nod and try to think of a way to change the subject.

“So where does that leave us?”

Jost pulls his hand away, and I rush to clarify. “I meant, what is your plan and how can I help?”

“Sorry.” He looks genuinely abashed for his reaction, and his hand twitches as though he wants to reach out again, but he doesn’t. “I don’t know.”

“How’s that working for you?” I ask, trying to lighten the mood.

“The truth is I never had a plan,” he confesses, his lip threatening to curl into a smile. “I came here to avenge Rozenn, and I’ve never known how I would do it. I’ve been waiting for an opportunity and then you …”

“Fell into your cell?” I offer.

“Something like that. More like you mouthed off, and I dropped you.”

I grimace at the memory and rub my tailbone. “By the way, I think you broke it.”

“Oh yes, it was me who broke it and not the days you spent sitting on a cold stone floor.”

“About that,” I interject. “In the future, do you think you could bring a pillow or something?”

“In the future? Planning to get locked up again?”

“Some girls have a knack for trouble,” I tease, tossing my head dramatically. But before I can peel off the laugh mounting in my throat, Jost’s hand catches my face and brings it to his own. He traces my jaw lightly with his nose and his warm breath tickles along my neck, sending ripples of anticipation through every bit of me. I realize I’ve stopped breathing and I part my lips slightly to gasp for air. Jost responds by trailing his mouth up my neck, my jaw, and my chin until his lips are over mine.

It’s a different kind of kiss than my first one with Erik, and yet it’s the same wildly exciting feeling. Jost’s lips crush into mine, and I reach out without thinking and pull him closer against me. My hand tangles in his hair, and the web shimmers around us. The rest of the world is perfectly still, but we are in motion, crumbling into one another.

FIFTEEN

WE LIE IN THE WEB NEXT TO EACH OTHER and stare up at the sparkling light that encloses us. Our hands barely brushing. Not speaking. I could stay like this forever, remembering our first kiss.

Jost finally breaks the moment, rolling over to his side and propping himself up next to me. He leans in and kisses my nose. “Hey, traitor, you hungry?” he asks, reaching toward the tray he brought earlier.

“I’m fine.” The spell broken, my anxiety comes rushing back. The last thing I want to do is eat.

He takes a bite of an apple. “Suit yourself.”

It was a perfect moment, completely under my control, until I was reminded that the one thing I want power over can’t be woven: my own thoughts. Closing my eyes, I wish I was home now; that Jost and I had met through a marriage profile; that Amie was trying to spy on my courtship appointment; that later I would climb into her bed and giggle about his hair or whisper about how it feels when he looks at me with those perfect blue eyes; and that afterward I would lie in my own bed, designing my wedding dress. But when I open my eyes, I’m here under my frozen dome with Cormac’s procedure looming in the future instead of a wedding. The only comfort is Jost resting beside me, but even that’s complicated.

“They’re going to map me,” I whisper.

“What?” He sets the apple down and stares at me.

“Enora was here to tell me that I’m going to be mapped on Friday.”

Jost swallows hard and sits up. “What does that mean exactly?”

“Medics are going to map my brain. Enora claims it’s so they can study Spinsters’ abilities.”

“Or control them,” he suggests.

“I think that’s what happened to Enora. They cleaned her thread, but I’m not sure why.”

“Mind-mapping couldn’t do something like that,” he says. “Even if they can control your skills—”

“The new method can,” I interrupt. “Didn’t you watch the State of the Guild?”

“No,” he says. “I was playing cards with some other valets in the back. Altering and cleaning is too tricky to risk on a Spinster.” But even he doesn’t sound convinced.

“The tech is safer now. I’m not sure how it works, but Prime Minister Carma said it can erase behavioral issues. That it can change how a person acts and thinks.” I tell him about what Cormac said about isolating problem areas in the strand and splicing new material into an individual’s thread. As I talk about it, my hands ball into fists. “It was supposed to be a process reserved for deviants, but the Guild seems to have a pretty flexible policy on what constitutes a deviant.”

Reaching over, Jost takes my clenched hands and gently laces his fingers through mine. “And you’re going to let them do this?”

“I don’t have a choice. It might be the only way to find out exactly how the process works.” *And it will get me into the research wing of the compound*. There might be useful records, but something tells me to keep that to myself.

“But you saw what it did to Enora,” he says softly.

“Let’s hope I’m wrong about that,” I murmur. “And don’t worry, I’m not going in unprepared.”

*

The guard at the entrance to the upper studios regards me with suspicion. I’ve never been here before, so I’m counting on my promotion to Crewel apprentice to get me in, but it’s pretty obvious I have no idea what the security procedure is. The heavy red door to the upper studios won’t budge, and I’m eyeing the companel next to it when the guard clears his throat.

“You’ll need to provide your proof of identity to the scanner.” He points to the companel.

I press my palm against it, silently willing it to open and wishing I didn’t have an audience right now.

“Adelice Lewys. Access granted,” it chirps at me, and the door clicks unlocked.

Heaving it open, I duck inside without looking back at the guard. I've drawn enough attention to myself already. I don't know exactly where I'm going, but I have a hunch. Since everything here is based on rank, I head toward the stairs. They spiral up endlessly, and I pass several floors of quiet studios before I reach the top, where I step into the most breathtaking room I've ever seen. It feels more like I'm standing on the roof of a tower. The screens have been woven so that it looks as if nothing stands between me and the sprawling vegetation outside the compound or the sky overhead. To the west, the belly of the ocean laps against the tower, and as I turn and look north it meets with a rocky shore that grows into large craggy mountains around the compound. It's not the same view that's programmed to run in my quarters.

In the center of the space an ancient brass loom, far bigger and grander than any I've seen before, swirls and shimmers as tiny gears turn and click. It's intricately etched with words in a language I can neither speak nor read. A chair of ruby velvet, tossed with silk pillows in emerald and onyx and sapphire, butts against it. Although around me the ocean crashes, birds soar, and snow falls, I hear nothing but the soft whir of the loom.

"It's lovely, isn't it?" Loricel says behind me, and I turn to find her stroking a furry ginger animal. "There are over eight hundred looms in the compound here, and they can all work on Arras's weave, but this is the oldest. It was the first loom stationed in the Western Coventry."

"I'm sorry. I didn't mean to barge in on you." I blush. Despite my close connection to her, I feel like a thief standing here and stealing the only beauty in her life.

"Don't fret," Loricel reassures me. She nods down to the creature in her arms, obviously aware that I'm staring at it. "It's a cat. I keep it as a pet."

"I wasn't aware pets were allowed anymore." In fact, I know they aren't. Pets were banned two decades ago, according to the civil responsibilities class we had at academy. Nowadays "pet" was a common nickname for secretaries. I smile, recalling how my mother fumed when her boss used the term.

"Citizens are not allowed to have them," she says with a shrug. "But it's one of the few perks I take advantage of as Creweler."

I nod. That makes sense. If anyone could have a pet, it would be Loricel.

“Tell me, Adelice, what do you see?”

I look around the room and describe the foaming waves cresting over the jagged rocky shore and the mountains quickly being blanketed in snow. “Your screens are amazing. I feel like I’m on the roof. I feel free.”

“Adelice, what did your home look like?” she asks, watching me closely.

I’m confused by the change in conversation, but I tell her about the tiny neighborhood that sat outside Romen. The perfect street peppered with tiny bungalows and gardens. And as I describe Mr. Figgins’s apple tree across the street, it grows on the wall in front of me. With a startled gasp, I whirl to find my own home tucked back behind the loom. It’s so close. As the first tear pricks the corner of my eye, I watch the image swirl and fade away into a stark, starless night.

“That’s better,” Loricel says. “They’re screens like you said, but I patched in a locator program years ago. When you walk into the room, the screens display where you want to be.”

“But I saw mountains and the ocean,” I say.

“It’s the default,” she explains. “Anyone who enters will see it. You have to describe the setting for it to change. Like us, the program can’t read minds. It’s very similar to the tracking system the Guild uses to locate citizens.”

“Cormac used one to show me my sister once,” I tell her, but it feels like a confession somehow. As though I’m revealing a weakness rather than knowledge.

She smiles and then briefly describes a sunny, lonely beach. “I prefer warmer climates.”

It’s unnerving to stand in the center of snowy mountains, my childhood street, and a lapping crystal ocean without moving, so I plop down onto the braided rug beside the loom to gather my thoughts.

“What’s really out there?” I ask finally.

Loricel doesn’t answer. She moves to the edge of the wall screen, but she doesn’t change the program. Instead, she very carefully opens a seam in the illusions, and I realize that the images on the walls are also a form of weaving. I wonder if she’s about to show me the image of the sea I

watch from my quarters or even a blizzard like the one I witnessed moments ago, but I could never have imagined what the break reveals. In between the fibers of the weave, I see a shapeless bloom of light and color.

What lies behind the screens on Loricel's studio walls isn't what I imagined. Even though I've been manipulating the weave around me for years, only now is the truth clear. The weave we call up on a loom, or manipulate in the room in front of us is only a façade. Behind it lies another layer, even more brilliant than the first.

"None of it's real," I whisper.

"It depends on your definition of real," Loricel replies. "I can touch this floor. I can touch you. I can eat the food at mealtime. How is that not real?"

And I can't answer her, because she's right. The tickle of water as I step into the bath, the way the pillow cocoons my head, Jost's hands stroking my face. How could these things not be real? And yet, standing here staring out at the raw matter flowing into oblivion, nothing can ever be real again.

"So that's it. This is reality," I whisper, the words barely making a noise as they leave my mouth.

Loricel purses her lips together as though she's unsure where to begin. "Yes and no. This is our reality, but not reality in the truest sense."

"I don't understand," I admit.

"The Guild doesn't mean us to, but if you are to take over here then you must understand." She gestures to the magnificent work space.

I can't tear my eyes away from the open seam. My hands twitch; I want to touch it. Finally, Loricel closes it up and leads me over to a small couch.

"We create it all?" I ask.

"We create Arras," she says. "But we only create a mantle—a cover, if you will. Matter and time exist on another planet, and we merely harness them. The looms allow us to weave and create Arras. Our reality is layered upon another world: Earth."

"Earth?" The word sounds strange and foreign, but it plucks at some long buried memory.

“Underneath Arras are the remains of the former world—a world that is no longer inhabited,” she tells me. “Few are left who remember the name Earth, and it’s dangerous for us to speak of it outside the safety of my studio. What you saw was the raw material that flows between our old home and Arras.” She stares at the wall where the rift had been.

“So that’s it?” I ask. “We’ve created our world on top of another world, but no one knows it.”

Loricel smiles. “Oh no, there are some who know, Adelice, but they aren’t sharing the secret. The truth has a way of changing to suit the purpose of those in charge. They would deny what I’m telling you. The Guild has worked hard to make sure we forget about Earth. Only the highest officials know, and even those working the mines are lied to about exactly what they’re doing. I must be very careful what I say during my trips to visit them each year.”

“Why keep it a secret?”

“You would be surprised at the amount of discontent here. The number of plots the Guild quells each year. Arras is not as peaceful as they make the citizens believe. Some would want to leave Arras, and the Guild would never allow it.”

I think back to my parents, who clearly loathed the Guild and tried to protect me from it. I’d thought they were a bit paranoid until I came here, but now I wonder how much they knew. And Jost’s brother-in-law, who had mixed with rebels. Yes, there were people who knew, but I already understood why they kept it quiet.

“But you have access to someone who knows the truth,” Loricel continues.

“Who?”

“Me.”

“Then what are they? Arras? Earth?” I have a hundred more questions, but I shut my mouth to keep them from tumbling out all at once.

“My predecessor was the second Creweler and though she knew the story better than I, much of it was lost in the passing from her own teacher. Some of it makes little sense to us now because we have lost this knowledge and with it the words and reality they describe,” she explains.

“On Earth, a war was fought to end all wars. Many of the regions, once called countries, became involved in the battle. One created a weapon so fearsome that it threatened to destroy everyone. They called this science, but it was merely the creation of men aimed at controlling the world. However, while one country readied to use this weapon, another scientist stepped forward with an alternative idea. Although he had worked on this bomb himself, he was more interested in time and the very matter that made up the world. He called the building blocks of this matter ‘elements.’”

“Elements? Like the raw materials we use to work the weave?”

She nods. “He found a way to isolate the cellular makeup of his world—grass, trees, air, even animals—and to view it in relationship to the time that threaded through the space it was in. He knew if he could build a machine that showed how elements and time knit together, people could manipulate the world in unnatural ways. You’ve seen the drills that mine the raw materials, I assume.”

I nod, trying to call the images to mind, but my memory of them is vague. They were monstrous and powerful beasts that smoked and ground, but into what? The training images didn’t show that.

“They mine elements from Earth that we manipulate into the weave. The four coventries rest over four mining sites, and Arras streams from the compounds. There is a raw weave under Arras; it keeps our time and environment separate. Because we exist on the periphery of the weave, we can view it on the machines in far greater detail and manipulate it without risk to the weave. The scientist who created the machines called it Crewel work. Spinsters came after the initial mantle and protective field were created. We helped initiate people into the weave much like the Department of Origins brings babies into Arras now.”

“But how could they build Arras without Spinsters? Only women can work the looms.” I shake my head, trying to force my thoughts into a rational explanation.

“They groomed women for this duty, but I believe some men might be able to do the work,” she says, cocking her eyebrow suggestively.

“But why give such an important job to us?” I ask, my annoyance showing in the sarcastic tone of my voice. “Why leave it to women?”

“The Guild can control women better.” Loricel sees me start to protest and holds her hand up to stop me. “Whether you like it or not, they do a damn good job of controlling us.”

Resentment toward the officials and Cormac and Maela and everyone who plays a part in this charade burns through me. “Who was this scientist from Earth?”

“His name and the names of all those of Earth have passed from our collective memory. His real contribution was allowing for a peaceful resolution to the war.”

“You’re telling me Arras doesn’t want to celebrate the genius of the man who created it?” I ask, remembering the number of holidays reserved in honor of officials who have made much smaller contributions.

Loricel sighs, and gives me a frown. “Don’t be stupid, Adelice. You know they clean and alter. If they think information is too risky to Arras’s stability, they remove it. The Guild doesn’t want the citizenry to question the looms, and they especially don’t want people to know about Earth. My grandmother confided to me that a long time ago she took an oath of loyalty to Arras to keep our family safe. I didn’t realize until I came here and began apprenticing to the Creweler that it was really an oath of secrecy. It was the only way to survive the war they left behind—to promise to keep Arras’s secret. But that wasn’t enough for the Guild. I assisted in the cleaning of the information from the collective memory.”

“Why?” I demand. “If they can’t do these things without you, why do you do them?”

“Because no one else will. I can’t alter all of Arras alone. Like it or not, and believe me, I *do not,* the relationship of Crewelers and the Guild is symbiotic. We cannot do our work without the bureaucracy and aid of the Guild. I won’t risk a war, not after the lengths we took to end the last one. Arras is too fragile to withstand it, and for every man like Cormac in our world, there are a hundred innocent women and children.” To her credit, there’s not a trace of anger or defensiveness in her voice.

“I feel stupid,” I say, “but how did creating Arras end the war? Didn’t we just drag our problems here?” Now that I understand how Arras came to be, I’m not sure I buy the careful-regulations-only ensure-safety story anymore.

“Arras was created, and its leaders came together to form the Guild of Twelve Nations. The population has been carefully monitored and the coventries established to maintain peace and prosperity. The Guild, while inefficient and often cruel, coordinates these efforts.”

“And all these men at war on Earth? They just made peace?”

Approval glints in Loricel’s eyes. “Of course not. Arras consists of the twelve nations from Earth that believed they could control and maintain the mantle while keeping the peace.”

“But there were others?”

“They were left on Earth with their bombs. They annihilated one another years ago.”

“Have you seen it then? Earth?” I ask, wondering how far Loricel’s power stretches and what she sees on these trips to the mines each year.

“No!” There’s the ring of amusement in her voice, but she doesn’t laugh at me. “I doubt there’s anything to see.”

“But how do you know that?” I ask softly.

A tiny flash of doubt shows in her eyes, but she pushes it away, and they grow distant again. “I guess I believed my mentor. What purpose would lying serve?”

I shrug and turn back to stare at the blank night sky. If there’s one thing the Coventry has taught me, it’s that lying always serves someone’s purpose.

SIXTEEN

NO COSMETICS. NO STOCKINGS. No elaborate hair. And no clothes. I feel naked in more ways than one. The thin cotton shift they've given me to wear for the initial mapping snaps up the back, leaving even less to the imagination than some of the dresses I've worn recently. The room's blank white walls reflect off the polished silver instruments laid carefully on a table next to the edge of the large metal slab I've been sitting on for thirty minutes. My butt is chilled numb, but the time spent waiting is only winding up my mind.

A woman clad in a white coat and a hairnet bustles into the room and adjusts the slab so that it folds up on one end. She helps me lean back onto it and applies a digital medcuff to my arm. I thought I'd feel relief when it started, but there's only dread. If the goal of this project is to make me lose my mind, then it's been quite successful already.

"This will monitor your heart rate and blood pressure," the nurse tells me, eyes on the numbers.

"Is this dangerous?" I ask, looking at the table of very sharp medical tools next to me.

"Rarely. If you start to have a reaction to the procedure we'll administer Valpron to calm you down," she says, with a pat on my arm.

A particularly long blade mesmerizes me. I can see myself in it. "Will it hurt?"

"Would you prefer Valpron now?" she offers, but I shake my head no.

"Dr. Ellysen will be right in," she says, brandishing a tiny needle. "This will only sting for a minute."

As the needle pricks my forearm I inhale sharply and blink against watery eyes.

"Good girl," she says absently, while she places a bag of amber liquid on a rack next to me. It oozes slowly down a tube into my arm.

A very young doctor enters the room, eyes glued to his digifile. It's a bit unnerving that he looks no older than I do, but then, with the patches available here, he may be much older than he looks.

“Adelice, how are you feeling?” he asks.

The doctors in Romen who did our annual health assessments were always old and grumpy. Male placements are given based on skill, and bedside manner isn’t one of the necessary qualifications. The youth of my new doctor doesn’t make him any less intimidating.

“Fine,” I lie. The IV in my arm unnerves me.

“The procedure will last about two hours,” he says, not looking up from his pad. “During that time you will lie still. You can sleep if you would like, or I can have Nurse Renni administer some Valpron.”

“The patient declined,” she whispers to him.

“Very well,” he says, sliding the small pad into his pocket. “I will be placing the mapping device over your head. It will scan various parts of your brain. During the process I will ask you questions, and it will map how your brain creates an answer.”

“I thought you said I could sleep,” I squeak.

“You can,” he assures me. “You’re being given a mental stimulant right now. It allows you to process information even in an unconscious state.”

I want to rip the needle out of my arm. There is no way I’m sleeping through a questioning.

“I will be sitting in the next room observing. You will hear me through this comcuff,” he says, hooking a small black device around my right ear. “Nurse Renni, can we fit the mapper?”

She nods and enters a code on the companel. Above me, the ceiling splits wide, and out of the gaping hole, two spotlights burst on. Blinking against their brightness, I watch the mapper descend. It’s a large dome, but as it comes closer I realize it’s not solid; it’s a series of connected wheels and gears so intricately bound together they appear to glide against one another. My eyes shift to the doctor ducking through the observatory door, and then to the nurse, who is checking my medcuff. As the device lowers over my head, I try to determine how it functions but a beam of green light breaks across my vision and I’m blinded.

“It’s normal,” the nurse murmurs next to me, fiddling with my medcuff. “You’ll be able to see again after the procedure is over.”

I arch up from the table and try to shove the device off my head.

“Deep breaths, Adelice, or I’ll have to get the Valpron,” she warns me.

This forces me to settle back into the darkness. My arms and legs tingle with the chill in the sterile room. Without my sight I feel trapped and immobile, like a fly in a spider’s web.

“Adelice.” The doctor’s voice sounds in my ear. “We’re beginning the test.”

I take a strangled breath and let it out slowly.

“Adelice, where were you born?”

“Romen, in the Western Sector.”

“Good. Answer specifically like that,” he says. “What were your parents’ names?”

I take another breath and answer, “Benn and Meria Lewys.”

“Your father’s occupation?”

“He was a mechanic. He worked on the Guild’s motofleet in Romen.”

“And your mother?”

“She was a secretary.”

“What is your sister’s name?”

“Amie,” I whisper. Each time I say her name, I see the wispy curls behind her ears.

“Please repeat.”

“Amie,” I say more authoritatively, pressure building in my chest.

“Are your parents living?”

I suck in a breath and exhale my answer. “No,” I lie.

“Adelice, did you maintain purity standards before your testing?”

“What kind of question is that?” I demand, my hands clenching into fists.

“Please answer the question.”

“Yes,” I say. “I maintained purity standards.”

As if I had a choice. Girl neighborhoods sit on the opposite side of the metro from the boy neighborhoods, and trips into the metro are carefully chaperoned by parents during approved movement hours. It wasn’t always like that though. My grandmother whispered stories about how things had changed since she was a girl. On my fourteenth birthday, a month before her removal, I asked her about the marriage profiles in the *Bulletin*. Girls at academy brought them to hide under their desks, taking

turns passing them to one another and giggling at the pictures of the boys.

“Why are there marriage profiles in the *Bulletin*?” I asked her. “Can’t girls and boys meet in person in the metro after they turn sixteen?”

My grandmother had deep brown eyes and she turned the full force of them on me, studying me before she answered. “It’s not as easy these days for girls and boys to meet. Parents don’t like the chance of it, and most young people get tongue-tied when they meet the first time. ’Course”—she chuckled a bit—“that’s not so different from before segregation.”

“I never realized there was a before and after to segregation,” I said, feeling very small under her wise gaze.

“There’s always a before and after to everything since before humanity began,” she said with a twist of her mouth, “and there’ll be an after to humans someday, too. But yes, when I was a girl. We lived together then—boys and girls. No separate neighborhoods.”

“Did you know grandfather then, before …” My hushed voice trailed into a question. Even talking about boys seemed strange.

“He grew up next door to me,” she told me, widening her eyes in mock shock at the confession. “I think it was easier to meet the marriage requirements then. Girls didn’t marry complete strangers.”

“But purity standards …” I couldn’t finish the thought. It was too embarrassing.

“Oh, yes, those,” she said with a wink. “They were harder to keep.”

I didn’t ask her if she kept them; it seemed too personal a question, even for grandmother, and because I was really embarrassed by her wink. “My mom and dad were profiled though, right?”

“Yes, our children were the first segregated generation,” she said, and there was a trace of regret in her words.

“But they loved each other when they got married,” I reassured her, not understanding the sadness in her voice. “So it’s okay.”

“Yes, they love each other,” she said in a soft voice, and I felt peace settle into my chest. I didn’t ask any more questions that day. Only now do I regret the answers I lost.

*

“What was your academy ranking?” The doctor’s voice filters in over the memory, and I realize I’ve been answering the mapping questions without listening. Stupid mental stimulant.

“I was ranked in the top quarter.”

“Were you disciplined often?” he asks.

“You guys have my file, you know this,” I say, fighting the urge to shove at the mapper again.

“We’re studying how your brain processes each question and answer,” he reminds me.

By the time the doctor asks me about my fifth-year teacher, I’m bored and uncomfortable. My back muscles spasm from the unnatural angle I’m lying at and my eyes water against the laser. I answer quickly, trying to stay awake. I’m sure they’re saving the juiciest questions for when I fall asleep.

“Adelice,” the doctor continues, “when did you discover you could weave?”

“At the testing, when I wove on the loom.”

He pauses, and I bite my lip. How much can this thing tell them?

“You never showed talent before then?”

“I didn’t have access to a loom.”

“Hmmm.” He murmurs something I can’t make out.

“And your sister, Amie, did she ever show talent?”

I grip the edge of the metal slab. “No.”

“Okay,” the doctor says, “we’re going to transition to talking about your time at the Coventry. What is your favorite dish from the food generators?”

I sigh and relax my fingers, returning to automatic-answer mode. He asks about my wardrobe, where I work, what my duties are and which ones challenge me. He doesn’t mention Maela, so I’m able to keep my blood pressure normal.

“Thank you, Adelice. Nurse Renni will be in to remove the mapper and IV,” he says in my ear.

Nurse Renni’s hand adjusts the medcuff on my arm and then she withdraws the needle from my arm. I wait a few moments, but the helmet doesn’t lift off my head. I refrain from screaming at her to take it off.

“Can you remove this now?” I ask through it.

“One moment,” she murmurs.

“Adelice,” the doctor says, drawing my attention back to the comcuff. “I apologize, but I have a few extra questions.”

“Extra?” My mind races, and although I can’t see or hear her, I’m sure Maela is feeding him more things to ask. She’ll probably string this out another hour.

“It will only take a moment,” he assures me. “Have you accepted any gifts from staff members or other Spinsters while here?”

I think of the tiny digifile that Enora gave me before my trip through Arras. Somehow I know this is what he’s asking about. “No, not really. Ambassador Patton sent flowers to my quarters after the State of the Guild.”

The young doctor clears his throat a little, and I sense his hesitation after I mention Cormac.

“Have you engaged in any sexual relationships since you joined the Coventry?”

“Are you serious?” I explode. “I kissed Erik. She knows that.”

Leave it to Maela to make this about her pet.

He continues, ignoring my outburst. “Have any of the others made sexual advances toward you?”

“You mean the guards?” I ask.

“No, Adelice,” he says. “I mean the other Spinsters.”

“The other Spinsters?” I ask slowly. “I don’t follow you.”

“I’ll take that as a no.”

“Okay,” I say, confused. Was he asking if I was a deviant? “Anything else?”

“Not this session,” he says, and the comcuff clicks off.

“This session?” I whimper, but the mapper is already lifting off my head. My eyes see only white. The nurse’s arm snakes under my back and she gently lifts me into a sitting position. A moment later thick gel stings my eyes, and I yelp.

“Blink hard,” she commands.

Despite the burn, the room blurs into focus, and I stretch my stiff legs out in front of me, savoring the delicious ache of the movement.

“I’ll move you to Observation,” Nurse Renni tells me.

“Observation?” I ask. “When will I be done?”

“We want to make sure there are no side effects from the laser scans or the neural stimulant,” she says, helping me to my feet and guiding me out of the room.

The observation room has pale green walls and several beds topped with white sheets, but my eyes, still oozing gel, can’t make out much else. The nurse holds up a soft robe and I slip it on over the thin gown and sit down on the nearest cot; the sheets crinkle up around my legs. Scooting back to the wall, I feel rough plastic under me. This isn’t the soft, comfortable bed I’m used to in my quarters, but it’s a huge improvement from the exam slab.

Squeezing my eyes shut, I open them and then repeat the action, trying to flush the gel from my eyes. I want to see where I am. Any area of the compound where outsiders work is territory I’d like to chart. But before I can even examine the shelf in the corner, the nurse reappears and helps Pryana onto the bed next to mine.

“I thought you girls could visit,” she says brightly.

“That was nice of you,” I say, and she beams back at me before bustling out of the room.

Pryana stares ahead, ignoring me.

“Well, that was fun,” I say conversationally.

“You’re twisted,” she says, not looking at me.

“Maybe, but it was the best two hours of my life.”

“Two hours?” she asks. “It took you that long?”

I frown. What does that mean?

“I was done in half an hour,” she says, glancing briefly in my direction.

“Oh,” I say. “Probably less to map.”

“I probably don’t need remapping,” she spits back.

“Sure, you’re just what they want,” I say.

Her eyes narrow, but she picks up a catalog and flips through it. “Madilyne told me that unless the initial scans registered a need for remapping, the whole procedure would take less than an hour,” she says, the side of her mouth curling up.

“Who’s Madilyne?” I ask.

“My mentor,” she says, as though this is obvious. “Didn’t yours tell you anything?”

“She told me enough.”

“Well,” Pryana says with a smirk, “I’d get a new mentor. Yours clearly isn’t doing her job.”

“Are you volunteering?” I ask.

“Careful, Adelice, or they’ll think you’re coming on to me.”

As much as I loathe Pryana, I turn and look at her directly. “Did they ask you about that?”

“About what?” she says, but then she sighs, grudgingly meeting my eyes.

“Other Spinsters, you know …”

“Hitting on me?” She shrugs. “Yeah, it was weird.”

Pryana turns back to her shopping. She seems less than interested by the mapping questions. But if she’s being truthful, and it is only a half-hour procedure, she doesn’t have nearly as much to worry about.

Since it’s probably not a good idea to snoop around with her here, I try not to be disappointed that I can’t get a better look at this wing of the Coventry. It’s under surveillance anyway. I flip through a catalog but don’t order anything. Meanwhile Pryana barks out order after order to the companel. If her wardrobe is half the size of mine, she doesn’t need any of it. But she strikes me as a girl who’s here to get her duty’s worth. Finally Nurse Renni reappears with our clothing. We dress in a hurry, our backs turned to each other. A guard meets us at the door and leads us through the sterile corridor. There is nothing here to distinguish one door from another. No sign to suggest what happens in the rooms we pass. Not even the sound of medics working. So much for my brilliant plan of using the mapping to get more info.

But as the guard guides us into the main lobby, I spy a nurse busily updating a digifile as she disappears behind a gray swinging door. It’s the first medical personnel I’ve seen besides the doctor and Nurse Renni. Edging closer to the door, I catch glimpses as it slowly sways to a close —a long hallway, gray tile, a small security door, and on it the word RESEARCH. It’s a good thing that monitor isn’t on me now, because my heart just stopped.

“Ladies,” the guard says, waiting for us like a gentleman at the access desk. We exit the clinic, and he takes us back to the high tower. As we

walk, I track the number of turns and count each step I take. If I can manage it, I want to get back there. But first I'll have to get clearance to go into the research area. Our escort deposits us at the brass elevator, bowing slightly as he leaves.

"What floor?" Pryana asks.

"F-f-fifteen," I stammer, shocked by the friendly gesture.

She rolls her eyes.

"What floor are you on?" I ask.

"Four."

I reach over to press the button for her floor, but her hand smacks mine away.

"Don't be stupid," she hisses. "If I have to ride in an elevator with you, I'm going to see the high tower."

"You live in the high tower," I remind her.

She glowers at me. "No, I live in the lower quarters and the elevators won't let me travel past the lounge floor."

For the first time I study the buttons. There are five floors below the lounge button, including Pryana's.

"Oh, I just assumed."

"Yeah," she says, "that's always your problem."

"Look—" I say, heat flushing my cheeks, but before I can tell her where to shove it, the doors slide open to my floor.

There are two more plum-lacquered doors on this floor, but I've never seen another Spinster here, which is why I don't push Pryana into the elevator and force her back to the lower quarters. There's nothing here she can't see, and it's not like she's going to come hang out with me in my room and have a pajama party. But as soon as we step off the elevator, I regret my decision. Two women are in the hall. Way to go, Adelice. Get caught showing off.

Their backs are to us, but then I realize only one of them is turned away, her blond hair neatly rolled and pinned into a French twist. I don't understand what I'm seeing. Arms snaking around her waist and up her back. Slender olive arms with brilliant red nails.

"Oh my Arras," Pryana gasps, and the pair split from their embrace.

It's enough to startle me, and I shove Pryana into the waiting elevator and push the button to shut the door. Twisting back to the women, I stare

at Enora and Valery, who are frozen to the spot. Now I understand why the doctor asked those questions. And so does Pryana.

SEVENTEEN

ENORA SNAPS TO, FLEEING DOWN the hall to the seldom-used stairs at the end. Valery shifts back on her heels and opens her mouth, but she doesn't say anything. We stare at each other. I can't quite wrap my head around it. Valery and Enora. It doesn't feel wrong exactly, just different. And a small part of me feels left out, like I should have known that the two people closest to me here share this secret. The unfairness of this thought makes me look away, ashamed. Who am I to judge them? I've been anything but up front about Jost.

I'm the one to break the silence. "Is that why she's acting strangely?"

"No," Valery says with a slight shake of her head. "This has nothing to do with that."

I pause for a moment and then take a deep breath. "Come on. Let's not stand out here. Besides I expected you to do my hair hours ago."

If Valery is puzzled, she doesn't show it. She simply follows me to my door. As I open it, I catch her glancing at the door to the stairs. Tugging on her arm, I urge her inside my quarters.

In the bathroom, I turn the faucet on, like Jost showed me weeks ago. Valery starts to gather her supplies: an apron, shampoos, and hair tonics. I take them away and push her into the prep chair. Leaning against the wall, I study her. Valery. Kind, quiet Valery. She's a lot like Enora.

"You don't have to tell me anything," I say.

"It's a long story," she says bitterly.

"A lot of those around here. Look, I can't tell you what Pryana is going to do, but it's none of my business."

"Oh, they already know," Valery says. Her voice trembles, but she holds her chin up. "That's why Enora is acting off."

"Is she worried they're going to kick her out?"

"Nothing like that. She's just been acting differently since the mind-mapping. She's been … distant."

I know exactly what she means. "I noticed. She barely told me anything about it."

“She went in twice.”

Twice? A tremor races up my spine.

“And you’re sure the Coventry knew that you two were …” I don’t even know what to call it.

“In a relationship?” she offers. “Yes.”

“I’m sorry,” I say, looking past her to the bathtub. “I’ve never—”

“Don’t worry about it,” Valery says, but her voice is thick and angry. “The Coventry nips these things in the bud pretty fast.”

“I thought they caught most deviants,” I say, feeling unsophisticated. This is what the doctor was asking about. Pryana knew exactly what his questions meant, but I didn’t, because I had never even noticed anything between Valery and Enora.

“Just because there are rules against it, doesn’t mean it goes away,” she says. “There are more of us out there, but we keep low profiles. It’s harder when—”

“You’re in love with a Spinster?”

“Exactly. We managed to keep it quiet for a long time, but lately surveillance has been stricter, especially on Enora.”

Because I came along.

“Do you think they did something to her?” she asks.

I think back to the State of the Guild, and Enora’s own words echo in my head: *Don’t be ridiculous.*

“It was like she didn’t know me,” Valery says in a soft voice. “I cornered her—”

“They remapped her.”

She shakes her head. “But they can’t remap Spinsters. It’s too dangerous. They only remap criminals and unstables! She might not be able to weave.”

“Trust me,” I say, placing a hand gently over hers. “There’s new tech.”

“Why? Because of us?” Her voice cracks on the question, and tears pool in her eyes. “She’s not even allowed to marry. She’s not endangering the population.”

“The Guild takes threats to Arras’s balance seriously. I know it’s not comforting, but if they believed they could fix her—”

“Fix her? Is that what you think? That we need to be fixed?” Valery’s voice rises over the faucet’s rushing water.

I clasp her hand and speak in a low voice. “None of us need to be fixed, but the Guild looks out for itself.”

Valery stares into my eyes for a long minute and then withdraws her hand like I’ve bitten her.

“They’re after you.”

“I assume so,” I admit.

“They’d never test their new protocol on their prize catch,” she says. “Enora was protecting you. She kept interfering with Maela’s punishments.”

“I know.” I could try to argue that I wasn’t to blame for Enora or Pryana’s sister or my own parents’ deaths, but I can’t deny I’m the common factor.

“Then you know this is your fault.”

Valery stands, and with one last sob, wipes her eyes. Without so much as a glance at me, she exits, leaving me alone with my guilt.

She doesn’t come to dress me for dinner. A gnawing ache in my stomach tells me I’ll never see her again, and no matter how hard I try, I can’t push the strange sensation away. At the table, where I sit with the other Spinsters, Enora’s seat is empty, which only increases my dread. It’s so consuming, I almost don’t notice that Jost is serving tonight.

“More wine?” he offers. Our eyes meet, and his crinkle at the edges in concern.

“Water’s fine.”

He returns a moment later with the water pitcher. He follows my gaze to where Enora should be.

“Valet,” I say, as he pours my drink, “there’s a problem with the auto light on my fireplace.”

“I’ll check on it later,” he says, and fades back to attend the other women.

As I glance down to the other end of the table, Pryana catches my eye and raises her wineglass. She smiles and then tips her head as though we’re toasting something. I turn away, but I don’t take another bite from any of the six courses they serve.

Jost is toying with the buttons on my mantel when I return from dinner. Kicking off my heels, I wander over in front of it. He presses a button and the fire roars to life.

“Seems to be fine,” he says.

“Silly me.”

“Do you need anything else?” he asks, raising his eyebrows.

That’s my cue. A second later, I’ve woven a new moment into the room. Before I can speak, I’m in his arms. I bury my face in his chest, unsure where to start.

“I don’t—”

“Shhh,” he hushes me. Taking my chin in his hand, he draws my face up to his. With his lips moving against mine, everything fades away. My pulse quickens, and I wrap my arms around his neck. I could stay here for eternity.

He pulls back first and I sigh, the shimmering dome and the frozen room resurfacing around us, along with all the problems of the real world.

“Enora,” I begin.

“She wasn’t at dinner,” he says.

“She’s been acting strange, and I think I know why.”

“Because she’s …”

“In love,” I confess.

“I know.” Jost pauses. “She’s in love with another woman.”

I stare at him. Maybe Valery was right and everyone knew about them. Exactly how had I missed this?

“Not much gets past the head valet,” he says, reading my mind.

“Does everyone know?” I ask a bit too sourly.

“They probably do now. It was a rumor for a long time,” he says, pulling me down to the floor. “Not the first time. Spinsters don’t exactly fall out of trees. The Guild is willing to overlook some things if a girl has the skill.”

“So why the sudden interest?”

He pauses for a moment, not meeting my eyes. “Honestly, more attention has been on her lately.”

“Because of me.” It stings, but I know he’s right.

“And with the new remapping tech—”

“She didn’t stand a chance,” I finish his thought, and just then something horrible occurs to me. “Do you think Pryana will report Valery for what she saw?”

“I don’t know,” he says, heaving a sigh. “It’s possible, and Valery doesn’t have the protection afforded a Spinster.”

“Why do they even care?” I groan. “She can’t be the only one sneaking around. I mean, look at us.”

Jost laughs as though I’ve said something insanely funny. Is that what he thinks about us? That we’re a big joke? I don’t know if I should hit him or cry.

“What?” I ask, trying to look defiant and hoping my blush isn’t too noticeable.

“Of course they care, Adelice. What if women married other women? Or if men married other men?”

In a split second, I transition from relief to embarrassment. Of course he meant them. But then something stirs in my chest, and I remember how Valery yelled at me. “There’s nothing wrong with that. It’s not hurting anyone.”

“You’ve got it wrong,” Jost says. “You asked why they care. The Guild. And I’m telling you, it scares them. A woman without a husband …”

“I don’t have a husband,” I point out.

“You would have in a year or two if you hadn’t been retrieved.”

“But Spinsters don’t marry—and no one seems threatened by us.”

“Sure. You don’t marry, but you’re also locked up in walled compounds. And,” he adds, his voice taking a mocking tone, “if you’re lucky you get to go out and hang off some official’s arm.”

My nostrils flare. Is that what he thinks of me? I’m leaning toward hitting him. I can cry later.

“Fact is, the Spinsters are far from a pure bunch. Why do you think they keep male servants around? To do the heavy lifting?” he continues, oblivious to the fact that I’ve pulled away from him.

“You have a lot of experience with that?” I ask, unsure if I’m mad at the other girls or myself now.

Jost’s eyes narrow, and he regards me closely. “Is this about us or Enora?”

“Enora.”

“Could have fooled me.”

“If they ignore that we’re all secretly courting half the guard, why do they mind if she’s in love with Valery?” I’m screaming, and I don’t even care.

“Would you let me finish?” he asks. “It threatens them—the officials—if a Spinster is loyal to someone else.”

“Valery said there were others,” I tell him, dropping the attitude a notch. “In Arras.”

“Did you ever meet any?”

“No,” I admit.

“They keep it quiet and everyone leaves them alone or they’re remapped. It’s not only them, though. If a Spinster falls in love with a man, even an official, they’ll put an end to it.”

“Remap her?”

“No, they’ve never done that before. Sometimes they remap him or rip him if he’s no one important. Others, they threaten. It happens more often than you think.” Jost shakes his head. “How do you think I became head valet? I kept my nose clean.”

A mixture of excitement and fear churns in my stomach. So there’s no one else. “And if they find out about …”

“About us?” he finishes quietly when I don’t continue. “I’m no one important.”

“Yes, you are,” I say. “They won’t be able to control me.”

“They have your sister.”

“They don’t have my heart.”

And there it is. As close as we’ve come to talking about whatever it is between us.

“I can’t lose you,” he says in a soft voice.

“You won’t.”

“It’s a risk for me even to be here,” he says, standing and beginning to pace the golden dome.

“They don’t know I can do this.”

“Not yet.”

“I know.” I sigh and stand up. We’re getting dangerously close to something we can’t take back, and I’m not sure I can do this without him

now that Enora's so different. "We need a plan, but first we have to figure something out."

He cocks an eyebrow.

"What's happened to Enora," I remind him.

I don't know where her quarters are located, but Jost does, so I dismantle the dome and smooth the strands of time back into place within the room's weave. Out of the safety of the time bubble, we're pushing our luck, but he leads me out of my room and up two flights of stairs to her hall.

"They monitor the elevator more than the stairs," he tells me as we ascend. "No one uses them."

Enora's hall is similar to mine, but all the doors are painted violet instead of plum. Jost raps on the first one and waits, but there's no answer.

"You sure about this?" he asks.

I nod. I won't sleep tonight until I've spoken to her.

Jost holds his thumb to the scanner and the door clicks open to a quiet room. Large paintings hang in golden frames throughout the apartment. From the doorway the images look like flowers, but as I move closer to them they blur into a mash of subtle colors, losing their beauty. A small four-poster bed—its linens taut and its cushions precisely placed—sits next to the unlit hearth. The room feels abandoned.

"She's not here," Jost says from the window.

A chill creeps up into my throat, but I push it back down. They can't have simply removed her. "Let's check the bathroom."

He follows me without a word. Her bathroom is smaller than my own and with the lights off I can barely make out her prep area except for the white plastic chair—exactly like mine—that glows faintly as we enter the empty room.

"I don't know where she is," Jost says. "I can run a locator on her from the valet station."

"Wait," I breathe, aware of the drip of a faucet. My hand stretches in the dark, searching for the switchscan. When I run my hand along it, light floods the tiny space, and I blink.

Jost's eyes adjust more quickly. "Damn it!"

I watch as he darts across the marble floor, but I can’t bring myself to look where he’s going. It’s in his voice. I don’t want to see what he sees. If I turn away now, I can go back to the still bedroom and out to the empty hallway and never know.

But then he’s pulling her up, and it’s too late.

Water sloshes over the side of the tub, trailing red down the white porcelain. She’s pale in his arms, not the polished ivory achieved via the aesthetician chair, but the blankness of untouched paper, bleached into absence. He struggles with her, heaving her body up by her underarms. The bloodied water laps against her bare breasts and trickles down her collarbone, and I can’t look away. Even from here, I spy angry red gashes along her wrists.

“Stop,” I command in a flat voice.

“Help me, Adelice,” he says, still pulling against her heavy body.

“It’s too late,” I tell him. The escaping water spreads across the marble, and I stare as it creeps toward the toes of my satin heels.

Jost looks at me but doesn’t say anything. After a moment, he drops her arms and lets her body slide back into the water. The motion forces another wave up over the side of the tub, and the puddle of water at my feet surges over my toes. I should step back.

“Maela,” Jost accuses quietly.

“No,” I say, shaking my head. “Enora did this.”

“She wouldn’t—”

“The Enora we knew wouldn’t.”

“Then it’s still them,” he says. He keeps his voice hushed, but his words are defiantly clear. The audio transmitters must be monitoring us, but why has no one come?

“Of course it’s them. It always is,” I say, and then turn to the door.

I crumble as soon as I’m over the threshold, but Jost is already there to catch me.

“I have to call this in,” he whispers.

Helping me to the only armchair in the room, Jost waits for me to settle back, but I lean forward on the edge of the seat, my elbows resting on my knees, and hide my face in my hands. Across the room, Jost speaks into the companel in a low voice. They’ll be here in moments and then explanations will be expected. I don’t know what to say. My mind

has stopped forming words and keeps replaying the ripple of water against Enora's breasts.

"Let me talk," Jost whispers, kneeling down next to me.

I turn my head and stare into his blue eyes. I wish I could sink into them and float away.

The guards arrive first, then a few maids, and finally Maela sweeps into the room.

"Where is she?" she asks like she can't hear the muffled chaos in the next chamber.

Jost answers, which is good, because I'm not sure I remember how to talk.

"You," she says to me, "stay here."

I look up and glare at her. Not much of a chance I'm going anywhere.

Maela disappears into the bathroom, and I strain to listen. I think someone is crying. Probably one of the servants. Some poor girl rejected years ago.

I wait forever, and Jost stays crouched by my side. We don't speak.

"Adelice," Maela says, coming back into the room, "you found her?" She lights a cigarette and blows the smoke down at me.

"Yes," I say in a clipped tone.

"And she was already dead?"

I clench my jaw and nod.

"And the last time you saw her?"

"Yesterday," I lie.

Her eyes turn to slits and she opens her mouth, but before she can speak, Loricel enters the room.

"I've informed the medical department," she says to Maela. "As well as the main office. An investigator will be here soon. You are no longer needed."

Maela turns to Loricel and lifts her chin. "I'll decide that."

"No," Loricel says in a quiet voice. "I will. Enora was in Manipulation Services. You are dismissed."

Maela shoots me one withering look, but she slinks out of the room.

"You found her?" Loricel asks.

I sigh and squeeze my eyes shut. If Loricel was the one who sent her to be remapped, I shouldn't be so glad to see her.

“When was the last time you saw her?” Loricel asks.

I open my mouth, ready to repeat the information I told Maela. “I saw her—”

“Tell me the truth,” Loricel interrupts. She’s already washed her face and without the carefully applied cosmetics and patching, the cracks of age are more visible. Her eyes sink back and her eyelids droop.

“I saw her this morning,” I whisper. “She was with Valery.”

“Thank you,” she says in a tired voice.

“Loricel,” I say, “you have to protect Valery.”

She presses her lips into a thin line and looks away. I don’t wait to hear her excuse. Standing, I stride to the door, away from her and Jost, but I hear her response. “I’m afraid it’s too late for that.”

Yeah, that’s what I thought.

I’m down one flight of stairs before Jost catches up to me. His boots beat down the steps behind me, but I don’t stop until his strong hand closes around my arm. He pulls me to his chest and I melt into him. I count the beats of his heart, each more precious than the one before, until I’m sure my own heart will break. As soon as he’s released my arm, I back away.

“Ad—”

“No.” I raise my palm to stop him from speaking. “This has to stop now. You saw what they did to her.”

“She did that to herself.”

“Because they drove her to it. They warped her mind, Jost.”

“She was an experiment.”

“Exactly,” I whisper. “To get to me. And anyone else in the way.”

“So we pretend nothing’s happened between us?” he asks.

“It’s the only choice we have.”

“I can’t accept that.”

“We always knew this couldn’t go anywhere,” I murmur.

Jost takes a step back and stares me down. I resist the urge to fall into his arms and instead push by him to the next set of stairs. There has to be another way. If I break his heart again …

“I won’t live without you,” he whispers, and his eyes say it all—desperation, betrayal, grief. But even as these emotions flash across his face, he reaches out his hand. He would risk everything—his own life—

for us. But I can’t make that sacrifice. The Guild will kill him, too, if they find out about us. I can’t lose him, so I have to let him go.

“Try,” I say, as coldly as I can, but I’m dashing down the steps before he replies.

EIGHTEEN

I SKIP BREAKFAST. AND LUNCH. I don't leave my room. Valery doesn't come to style me, so I spend the day strung across my prep chair drinking a bottle of wine. Valery would have liked that; she was always telling me to relax while she worked on me. Here you go, Val. I have another glass for Enora. And then one for my mother, who would so not approve. As it turns out, there are a lot of people to drink to, and I do my best.

I devote the second half of the bottle to Jost, who isn't dead. Yet. I'm sure dragging him into this will be just the ticket to add him to my personal death toll. And no matter how much I drink, this thought sobers me right up. I can't let them kill Jost or Amie or even Loricel. I can't let anyone else suffer because of me. Which leaves me with two options: buck up and take one for the team or get out of here. The trouble with Arras is that the whole thing is watched and controlled by the Guild, right down to my personal identifying sequence. Even if I got out of the compound, a tracker could use my sequence to hunt me down before I made it past the rebound station. Or maybe Cormac would skip catching me entirely and have me ripped.

By midafternoon I've come up with nothing. But since no one bothers to force me to work I slip into a pair of linen pants and a soft cotton tunic—the only clothing in my entire closet that doesn't require buckling, zipping, or stockings. It's the perfect outfit to lie down and waste away in. Staring out the window from my bed, I watch as waves seep onto the shore. There is no snow on the mountain today. Everything is placid, programmed to counteract last night's tragedy. The wine churns in my empty stomach as I stare out at the peaceful scene, and I feel anything but tranquil.

Behind me my door clicks open, but I don't turn around. I told Jost not to come, so he can go about whatever menial task he's concocted as an excuse to see me. Besides, I probably smell like Cormac by now. Not very romantic. But he doesn't go to the fireplace or my bathroom. I can't

detect the exotic aroma of a late luncheon. Instead he walks straight to me and stands there; I keep my back to him.

“Go away.” Happily, my speech is clear.

“I can’t.” It’s Jost’s voice, but he speaks in a firm tone—confident of his right to be here. “I’ve been sent to retrieve you for a meeting with Ambassador Patton.”

The voice sounds so like him, but different, too. More professional, arrogant. Something clicks in my brain, and I flip onto my other side. Big mistake. Stars burst across my eyes, making my head swim. Maybe I am a little drunk.

“Been a while,” I say.

“I thought it was better to—” Erik begins.

“Stay away?”

“I didn’t want to push things.”

“I think we crossed that line,” I say with a cold smile.

Erik’s jaw tightens and then relaxes. I hold out my hand, and he helps me up. My balance is shaky, but ever the gentleman, Erik takes my arm without a word. It’s strange to touch him now. I can see my arm looped through his, my skin scrapes against his wool suit jacket, even the back of my clenched fist brushes against his bare wrist, but there’s no spark. My nerves don’t react to the contact. I replay the memory of our kiss in the garden. My first kiss. But now I feel like a watcher not a participant. If there was something there, Maela destroyed it, along with the tips of my fingers. Or maybe it’s the numbing effects of that wine I drank.

We travel in silence, and Erik’s stride is purposeful. Getting me to the meeting: that’s his only objective. It’ll be a relief to get rid of him. The delightful numbness has worn off by the time we reach the closed door. Erik nods to a tall, stern guard in that way that men greet each other.

Erik peels my arm back from his and guides me inside. He doesn’t follow, but as he bows his farewell, I catch a simple “I’m sorry” escape his lips.

Bit late for that.

Inside, Loricel sits at the far side of a large circular oak table and Maela perches on a leather-backed chair by the door. She straightens up and thrusts her chin forward as I enter the room. I’m pretty sure she’s

going for proud, but really she just looks constipated. And my old buddy Cormac is at a small bar in the corner, pouring a drink.

“Good to see everything’s back to normal,” I say.

From her seat across the room, Loricel’s smile turns into a frown of disapproval.

“Adelice,” Cormac says, stirring a squat crystal glass, “always a pleasure to see you.”

Such a politician.

“Have a seat,” Loricel says.

I take a deep breath and plop down into a chair. I start to cross my legs, but remember I’m wearing trousers, so I lean forward, legs wide, and give Maela a baiting grin. Her face stays serene, but her knuckles go white.

“I was shocked to hear of the unfortunate incident with your mentor,” Cormac says, taking a chair next to me.

“Were you?” I ask with wide eyes.

“I was,” he repeats in a tone that dares me to ask again. “Sometimes the demands of a Spinster can be overwhelming, and with the important work we do here we can forget to look after our own.”

“I’ve felt very looked after,” I assure him.

Maela clears her throat beside me. “Enora struggled with—”

“Save it,” I snap at her. “We know what Enora struggled with.”

“Remember your place—”

“Enough,” Loricel says in a quiet voice. “Adelice knows her place, and you would do well to learn your own, Maela.”

“She’s barely even been on a loom,” Maela says.

“She’s got more talent in her left pinkie than you have in your whole body,” Loricel responds.

I have to bite back a smile.

“Don’t be arrogant,” Loricel says, turning on me. “She’s right. With this political nonsense, you’ve had no real training.”

“The Coventry needs to maintain a face of power,” Cormac says, sipping his drink. “Adelice is key to that.”

“Cormac, you worry about the political and I’ll keep this world working,” Loricel says, slamming her hands down on the table. “If you

plan to move her into my position, she needs to be prepared, not indoctrinated."

"Do I even need to be here for this?" I ask.

"Watch your mouth, girl," he growls.

"I'd play nicer with your future Creweler, Cormac," Loricel says to him. "She may not be as forgiving as I am."

"The point is, she's not ready," Maela reminds them, and they both glare at her.

"I'm ready enough."

"You understand the fundamentals," Loricel says, "but you have a lot to learn before you can assume my position."

"What if I don't want it?"

"I wouldn't worry about that," Cormac says, shaking his head. "You're under stress with the loss of your mentor, but we've arranged for you to receive some evaluation and counseling. Enora's death—it reminds us how demanding this work can be."

"Guess it's not all fancy dinners and dresses," I say coldly.

"No, it's not," he says. "We'll need you here more than ever now."

"Loricel planning a vacation?"

Cormac's eyes flicker to Maela's, and he shakes his head.

"Loricel has opted to forgo further renewal treatments."

I look from him to her, but her eyes are vacant. "What does that mean?"

"It means I'm going to die," Loricel says softly.

I suck in a breath and let it out slowly. Cormac watches me from the next chair, and I work to keep fear off my face. Without Loricel … Well, I don't even want to consider what this place will be like then. Does she think I can stand up to him?

"So you need a new Creweler?" I ask after a long moment.

"We need you," Cormac says.

I don't answer him.

"You'll be studying under Loricel all working hours until—"

"She dies." I finish his thought.

"Yes, and it's imperative that you're prepared to assume responsibility when she passes."

"Especially since you're already short a Creweler's assistant."

Cormac’s eyes narrow. “She wasn’t half the Spinster you are, Adelice.”

“I’m half the person she was,” I say with a shrug, barely keeping my voice steady. “So I guess it evens out.”

“There are other Spinsters,” Maela breaks in, but Cormac shoots her a look that shuts her up.

“You needn’t worry yourself about Adelice,” he says to her. “You’ve wasted enough time.”

“That girl would have no training if it weren’t for me,” she says, stabbing at the air in my direction.

“That girl,” Cormac says quietly, “would be dead if it were up to you. You are in danger of overstepping your bounds.”

“And we know what happens to girls who overstep their bounds,” I add.

No one laughs.

“Adelice, you’ll report to Loricel’s studio in the morning. I’ll let her know when your evaluation is scheduled,” Cormac says, rising from his seat and buttoning his tuxedo jacket.

“Cormac,” Loricel says. “A word.”

She gestures for him to follow her, and soon I’m alone at the table with Maela.

“I’m sorry for your loss,” she says.

I stare at her. She can’t be serious.

“No, really,” Maela says. “We’ve had our differences—”

“That’s one way to put it.”

“But,” she continues, ignoring me, “Enora was a good Spinster.”

“Did Pryana tell you?”

Maela purses her lips. “Tell me what?”

“About Enora.”

“I was called as part of the emergency response.”

“No, about Enora and Valery. In the hallway.”

“No, she didn’t tell me, but there’s something you need to understand,” she says. “If you think Pryana is a puppet of mine, you’re in for an unpleasant surprise. She is a force all her own.”

“Which you created—”

“Which I propelled,” she corrects. “I won’t lie, Adelice. I wanted you to be enemies, but Pryana was never going to be your friend.”

“I don’t know,” I say. “We were hitting it off.”

“Pryana would stab her own sister in the back if it suited her.”

“She seemed pretty upset when you ripped her sister.”

“Listen,” Maela says, standing and staring down at me. “I’d watch who you tell about your own little sister. Pryana’s not the forgiving type. Believe me, I did you a favor.”

“Feel free to keep your favors to yourself in the future,” I say.

Maela tosses a bored expression my way and exits. There’s no way I’m about to believe her fake sympathy or her sudden interest in me. Since I’m going to be the next Creweler, she’s just doing some repair work on the damage she’s inflicted.

“Done?” Erik asks, poking his head through the doorway.

“Do I get an escort again?”

“Cormac wants assurance that you’re safe at all times.”

“Oh good,” I say with a sigh. “Will you be camping out on my floor?”

“Outside your door, as a matter of fact.”

I screw my face up. I guess I won’t be sneaking out to investigate the clinic tonight.

“Don’t look so annoyed,” he says, taking my arm. “This way you get to wake up and go to sleep to me.”

Despite my resentment for how he acted after our kiss, I laugh. He’s just so self-assured.

“Every girl’s dream,” I say, tipping my head to the side.

“I am sorry,” he says through gritted teeth.

“Sure. It’s nothing.”

“I know what she did to you.”

“Drop it, Erik.”

“You have to know that it would have been worse if I’d come to see you.”

“Yeah, you’re probably right,” I say, “but I guess we’ll never know.”

“So that’s it, then?”

I sigh and pull my arm out from his. He’s not making this easy. “Erik, we kissed. I was a little drunk. I’m over it.”

“And what if I’m not?” he says, slowing his pace.

I walk faster, pulling him along with me. “It doesn’t matter how powerful I am—or will be after this promotion—it’s not going to happen.”

“Promotion?” he repeats.

“I’m training to replace Loricel,” I say with a shrug. “I assumed you knew.”

“No, but I guess that explains Maela’s change of heart.”

“Oh, you mean how we’re best friends now?”

He gives me a crooked grin. “I wouldn’t go that far, but she’s definitely trying to get on your good side.”

“At least she’s not trying to kill me.”

“Again, I wouldn’t go that far,” he says.

“The more things change,” I mutter.

“Just forgive me?” he says, and I groan at the circularity of his thoughts. He’s like a puppy chasing his tail, except it’s mine he’s after.

“I forgive you,” I say. “But it doesn’t change anything.”

“I can wait.”

“Erik,” I say, struggling with how much I want to share. “It’s not only that. I’m not the same as I was a few weeks ago. Things have changed, and it would be a waste of your time to wait around for me.”

He looks down at me as though he’s watching my neurons firing, and I shrink back from his penetrating gaze. “I should have known,” he says, a hint of a smile playing on his lips before fading away.

I bite down on the inside of my cheek and keep my eyes on the floor. Something in his voice is giving me goose bumps, but he can’t actually know …

“Look,” he says, “I get it. But there’s something you need to consider. I have more resources at my disposal and a certain value to the Guild. He doesn’t. You’ll get him killed.”

I swallow hard and glance up to his watching eyes. “Is that the best you’ve got?”

“I’m not trying to steal you,” he says, lowering his voice. “I know Jost better than you think. I don’t want to see anybody get hurt.”

“That’s thoughtful of you,” I murmur.

“Think what you want,” he says. We’re at the door to the brass elevator. Reaching forward, he presses the Up button and holds the door

when it opens. We step in. When the elevator door slides closed, he leans down. I can feel his breath warm against the back of my ear.

"Remember what I said to you that night at the ball?"

His words tingle in my ear and down my neck, but I manage a nod.

"You know that plan we discussed. If you finally have one, now's the time to use it."

The tingle turns into an electric charge and my pulse builds frenetically in my chest, wrists, ears. "Well, I don't," I whisper.

"Then think of one," he says into my hair.

He lingers there for a moment, and I close my eyes, wondering if that kiss really meant nothing to me. The *ding* of the elevator door snaps them back open. Beside me, Erik straightens and extends his arm to hold the sliding door—protecting me—as I cross the threshold.

NINETEEN

THE STRANDS OF LIGHT WRAPPING one another in the void mesmerize me. I've found the seam in Loricel's illusion and opened it. I clutch my right arm against my body; my fingers ache to reach out, to discover what the thick rough weave feels like. I force myself to keep my hands back away from the breach now. This room, here in the distant tower, where we can call any place in Arras before us, is the only place that feels real.

"You could waste away there," Loricel says behind me.

The studio was empty when I arrived, but I knew she'd be back soon. Now that she's here, I wish I had more time alone to study the rift. If I'd been here much longer, I might have crossed the line and touched the rough, raw material that billows out between Earth and Arras.

Loricel moves to stand beside me. "It's hard to fathom, isn't it?"

"I see it," I say, "but it feels like another illusion … I want to touch it."

"Like your hands are physically being drawn to it," she says.

"You too?"

"Yes."

"Have you?"

"No." There's the firmness of resignation to her voice. "I guess I don't want to know. There's so much possibility until I touch it. Perhaps its powers outweigh my own, or perhaps I could manipulate the raw material as I manipulate the fabric of Arras. I don't know which I prefer, so I keep my fingers back."

"When did you see it the first time?" I ask.

"Kinsey, my predecessor, showed me," she says, tilting her head and regarding me with half-open eyes.

"And all these years? You've never—"

"Perhaps I'm a coward."

"No." I shake my head. "I think it's harder not to touch it. I want to so badly. It's a compulsion. I admire your ability to deny it this long."

Loricel snorts. "Maybe I'll do it before I die."

I sigh deeply and turn to close the spot. My fingertips burn when they skim the raw material as I repair the hole; it's the most feeling I've had in them for weeks.

"You can feel it?" she asks.

"It's pulsing. Alive," I say quietly.

"Because it is full of life," she says. "I know this is hard for you to accept."

"How do you close opened eyes?" I ask her, desperate to know how she's restrained herself through the years.

"Like you do at night," she instructs me. "You work the loom until you're too tired to go on, and then your eyes close naturally."

"Is that why you're refusing renewal?"

"Yes, I know it must feel horribly unfair. My leaving you here to take over, but—"

"You don't have to explain yourself," I stop her. Even now I feel the burden of the raw weave pressing down on me. I can't imagine what it's like for her.

"I couldn't leave it," she says. "Not without a true Creweler in place to carry on my work. Adelice, you must know how I feel about the Guild. About Cormac, Maela, and their puppets. But that pulse you feel, that electricity, that's not them."

My fingers sting as she speaks, reminding me how they want to touch the raw material, but I do my best to push the feeling down deep inside me. "We don't do it for them."

"No," she agrees. "We do it in spite of them."

"Will they keep watching me?" I ask.

"They didn't stop watching me until I was seventy," she says. "Cormac is many things, but he was the first to realize I wasn't a threat to Arras."

"I guess I have a while to wait."

Fifty-four years.

Loricel opens her mouth and then presses her withered lips back together.

"What?" I ask, scanning the room. "They're watching us now?"

"The illusions in this room are too complex to track."

Now I understand that she's not sure she wants me to know the truth, because it might be too much for me to live with. Loricel needs to make sure Arras has a Creweler after her death, and if I leave, it won't.

"You have to understand my dilemma," she says finally. "My whole life is this world. I have given everything to it."

"I think I understand," I say.

"I wish you could. But until you've devoted your life, fought human nature, harnessed matter itself, and contained it for decades, you can't. It's a lot to ask of anyone." The lines on her face deepen as she speaks, as though the weight of years is dragging down her very skin.

"But if I don't—"

"Then it will fade away."

My eyes find the floor, and I inhale for strength. "So you won't stay, even if I leave?"

"No," she confirms. "My age has passed. It is up to you. Of course, I hope you will stay. I believe that you feel the pulse and understand its importance."

"How long will it survive without a Creweler?"

"They have enough material stocked to last a decade. Maybe," she answers. "But it will be chaos—an extended apocalypse. And Cormac will be in charge by then."

"Of the Coventry?" I ask. "He acts like he already he is."

"He oversees us now, but soon he'll be elected prime minister of Arras."

"He'll have control over everything," I whisper.

"Except you. If you stay."

I take a seat on a velvet divan, working through this revelation. "Well, you don't have to worry. My sister is here. I won't leave her."

"That's the problem," Loricel says. "I want you to make an educated decision. You know about the new remapping tech?"

"They talked about it at the State of the Guild. They mapped me the other day," I tell her.

"Cormac has mapped each of us—"

"Even you?"

She nods. "He claims that they are trying to understand why some girls have the ability to see and touch the weave and others don't. He's

particularly interested in why most men can’t see it.”

“Most?” I recall her saying she believed some men could weave.

“Most can’t. There are rumors of departments where men work with the weave, but the Guild always denies it.”

“Do you think they exist?” I ask, realizing I’m finally getting more of the story.

“Definitely. The Coventry is just the face of the Guild. What we do is important, but many more than us are at work.”

I have a hard time imagining someone more powerful than Loricel. “More important than you?”

“My—our—skill,” she corrects herself, “is necessary to harness the actual raw materials. Without that Arras would decay and crumble from within. Then they need Spinsters to add and maintain, but our value stops there.”

“But they still need us.” The Western Coventry alone houses a hundred girls and women who work shifts around the clock. There’s no way Arras could survive without Spinsters.

“Yes, but if they could simulate our skill, they would not.”

“That’s why they’re mapping me,” I whisper.

“They haven’t figured it out yet,” she says. “But the rate at which they are producing manipulation technology worries me. It will not be long.”

“I can’t let them map me again,” I say, balling up my fist in my lap.

“They won’t ask your permission,” she says with a wry smile. “Besides they already have you scheduled for it.”

“Is Cormac communicating through you now?”

“No, it’s my job to lie to you. Cormac assumes I won’t tell you the truth, because he believes I’ll put Arras above you.” She stops and studies my face for a moment. “Because I always have in the past.”

“Always?” I ask.

“It’s not my place to make a decision for you, especially considering what they have planned.” Loricel’s eyes drift to the floor and when she looks back up, they wander between myself and the walls of her studio.

“You don’t have to tell me what they have planned for me,” I say. “I’m smarter than I look.”

She laughs, but no trace of amusement stays on her face. “They are going to map you again when you go in for evaluation.” Her words burst

forth as though they've only barely managed to escape.

"I see," I murmur.

"No, you don't," she says in a rush. "Then they plan to remap you."

I think of the petty housewives at the State of the Guild thrilling at remapping their children; they were excited to make them more obedient. I push down the scream of anger threatening to spill out of my mouth, which will surely bring the guard up. *How dare they?*

"They can study me all they want," I say.

"Eventually they will find their answer—"

"And then they can finally kill me." My heart no longer leaps when I speak of my death. Its inevitability is another fact of my new life here. I guess I'm transitioning well to the idea.

"Maybe, but they'll have to remap you first, to succeed in making you docile."

"I don't think they could go far enough to make me *docile*," I say, the last word oozing with rage.

"You saw how far he was willing to go with Enora," Loricel says.

"Why do you think they tested the remap on Enora first? Because of her affair with Valery?" I guess.

"Criticism of the relationship was a ruse," Loricel says. "It provided an easy excuse to test on her."

"Did she know? What they planned to do to her?" I ask.

"I don't know. They took her away in the night. I wasn't notified."

They always come in the night.

Even if most of what Loricel is telling me is pure theory, there's the bitter edge of truth to some of it. Better to be prepared. "How long do I have?"

"They're still running tests," she says. "To be honest, Enora's suicide rattled them. Cormac is afraid you will become unstable, too."

"How long?"

"A week," she says, "at the most."

I stand and walk to the wall, trailing my fingers along the peaceful image of the calm ocean; it ripples where I touch it, distorting and coming back together. It's still the same image, but now it bears a shadow where my hand disrupted it.

"There's nowhere to run," I say.

“I know.”

“Enora knew that.” I turn back to face her. “It’s why she killed herself.”

Loricel heaves a sigh. “She was confused, Adelice.”

“Because they screwed with her,” I say, shaking my head. “She was lost. I could see it the last time we spoke, but I didn’t know what they’d done to her.”

“You couldn’t have prevented it,” Loricel tells me.

“I could have. I’ve been fighting them since the moment they arrived at my house. If I’d come along willingly, my parents would be alive and Amie would be safe. Enora and Valery’s secret would be safe. She and Valery—”

“Would be living half a life,” Loricel stops me. “Don’t overestimate your culpability. Death is the only escape for us.”

“But that’s what I don’t get,” I admit. “Maela told me there was no escape, even in death.”

Loricel presses her lips together. “I’m not sure exactly what Maela means. Her ambition makes her a powerful woman in her own right. Because of it, she knows much more about the Guild’s inner operations than the rest of us.”

“What happens to people when they die before their thread is ripped?”

“It happens so rarely—”

“But it does happen,” I press.

“Occasionally. And when it does, we remove the remains of the thread,” she says.

“Remains?” I recall the intricate strings that bind tightly together to make up a single whole thread.

“When someone dies before a removal request is completed, part of their strand …” Loricel pauses and meets my eyes. “Disappears.”

A chill runs through my entire body. “Where does it go?”

“They aren’t sure. That’s why they’re so careful to remove weakened strands themselves. It’s why they capture enemies first or rip them directly. The Guild wants control over removed threads.”

A thousand questions are racing through my head, threatening to spill out at once. It’s a lot to consider—plots and remapping. I take a deep

breath and decide on one to ask first, before the others. “Why do they care what happens to the removed threads?”

Loricel shrugs. “I don’t know.”

“Then who cares what happens to the parts that disappear?”

“When I first began at the Coventry, we didn’t do preemptive removals. We simply patched and removed the remains. About fifty years ago, that changed,” she explains.

“What do you think happens?” I ask. Even if I’m not sure I believe everything she’s told me about Earth and the origin of Arras, she still knows more than anyone else.

“I think the part of the thread that disappears goes back into Arras.”

“Into the weave? But wouldn’t that provide new raw material?” I ask.

“Theoretically.” A note of distrust rings in her voice. “It could strengthen Arras.”

“Then why rip them preemptively? Why not utilize them?”

“The Guild doesn’t trust what it can’t understand. Letting those people go is an act of faith they’re incapable of.”

I know she’s right, but I still don’t fully understand the Guild’s motives for the preemptive removals, and I don’t think Loricel does either. This is about more than control.

“I don’t understand why they don’t tell us about Earth or remnants. There has to be a reason they don’t want us to know about them. Even you think it’s important enough to tell me,” I point out.

“Some things shouldn’t be forgotten.”

“Remembrance is never useless,” I say, recalling my mother’s wise, quiet smile whenever she spoke those words to me as a child. My fingers twist to the techprint on my wrist.

“It’s important that you understand where we come from, Adelice. Especially if you will be assisting in the mining operations,” she continues. “Earth’s resources can’t last forever, not if the Guild tries to mine without the support of a Creweler. They won’t have anyone who can see the raw materials, but that won’t stop them from trying.”

“Wait, if we’re pulling the material from the surface,” I say, my eyes growing wide, “then Earth is frozen!”

Loricel cocks her head to the side and regards me thoughtfully. “So you’ve discovered warping.”

Warping—that's the perfect word for it. The moments I made in my quarters weren't frozen, they were warped. I take a deep breath and admit my secret to her. How I can touch time without a loom. I even tell her about the separate moments I've woven, but I leave Jost out of my stories.

"Yes," she says. "I knew you could do it, but I had no idea *you* knew."

"It was a happy accident," I say. I'm instantly drawn back to the stolen moments spent with Jost in my room. I look away so she won't see me blush.

"Are you leading with your left hand?" she asks.

I pause and consider the question. "I don't honestly know. We were taught to lead with our right on the loom, so I don't think so. Does it make a difference?"

"You're left-handed," she says. "Crewelers always are. It allows us not to be constrained by the forward motion of time. That's what helps us catch it."

"Should I always use my left hand?" I ask, flexing my left hand's fingers now and staring at them in wonder.

"No." Loricel shakes her head. "It's very powerful. If you can warp with your right hand, or using both hands at the same time, it's much safer until you've truly honed your ability. The fact that you can warp without starting with the left is impressive. But be careful."

"Okay," I say, inhaling deeply.

"There's something else you have to understand about warping," she explains, holding out a hand in warning. "Yes, it pauses the moment around you. But it also puts you on a different time line. Within the warp, you can live a whole life."

"Can I die there?" I ask. Would wasting away slowly with Jost be better than a quick, painless remap? I'd be dead either way.

"Yes."

"And I would be dead everywhere—in the warp *and* in the real world?"

"Yes," she says emphatically.

"But the world outside," I say, biting my lip slightly in concentration, "is locked in that moment."

“That’s what you have to understand,” Loricel says, leaning toward me. “Only the moment where you’ve caught the time is frozen. Essentially you’ve created a field of safety. The time and matter around it is frozen and no one can enter it. But merely in the immediate area where you’ve warped the weave.”

“Outside that, time continues?”

“Yes. And eventually the Guild would be able to break through your warp, but it would take a while.”

It’s a warning not to put too much faith in my happy little bubble. It can only keep me safe for so long and certainly not long enough to make much difference.

“Can you move backward along the time line of the warp?” I ask, my voice filled with hope.

“You already know the answer to that,” she says, shaking her head sadly. “You can’t turn back time. We can harvest it, and stop it in the mining fields, but the time lines always move forward.”

“Then Earth?” I prompt.

She sits back in her seat and clasps her hands in her lap. “There are dead spots in the mining locations where the coventries rest. These are where we capture the time and elements for Arras. The drills create warps in those locations that freez the Earth around them.”

“But outside the warped areas, the rest of it is untouched? There could be people there still!”

“I doubt that,” she says with a hint of sadness. “The only people left on Earth were bent on its destruction.”

I frown, watching Arras spread around me through the wall illusion. What lay beneath it?

“You know, I promised Enora I would never tell anyone I could weave without a loom,” I confide.

Loricel gives me a sad smile. “She was protecting you. She knew it would mark you as a Creweler, but you must have known the Guild was aware of your talent.”

“I didn’t want to worry her,” I admit. “And I thought maybe if I pretended not to know they would think they had made a mistake.”

“Your mentor did the best she could in the situation, as did you.”

Kind, protective Enora. Only one thing I've learned today comforts me. "So Enora," I say slowly, "was reabsorbed."

"Part of her was," Loricel says.

Some part of her escaped. This makes me smile.

"Adelice," Loricel says, breaking into my thoughts, "did she say anything to you before she …"

"No." I focus on the memory of our last meeting, combing through the conversation in my head. "She was acting strangely though. I knew something was different."

"Cormac is obsessed with why she did it," Loricel confides. "He cannot confirm whether her suicide was prompted by the procedure or by her guilt over her relationship with Valery."

"Is that why Valery was ripped?"

"He was angry," she says. "The remap should have reprogrammed Enora, but Valery reached out to her. He blamed her for Enora's confusion, but he can't be sure what caused Enora to act."

"Then Pryana tattled." It's the only way Cormac could have known that Valery had approached Enora after her remap. I should have known from the smug look on her face at dinner. "I guess a vendetta outweighs someone's life."

"Do not discount the power of paranoia either. If this girl was raised to be an ideal Eligible, she probably bought into all the nonsense the Guild sells its citizens," Loricel advises.

"It doesn't matter," I say. "Pryana, Valery—they were just pawns in Cormac's and Maela's games. They did this to Enora." *And they're going to pay*, I add silently.

Loricel leans forward and takes my hand. "There's no way to know for sure what happened, because we haven't found any evidence. No note. No diary. Not a thing."

"Are you saying someone else—"

"No," she says. "Enora took her own life, but her initial map showed she was conflicted. Her thoughts were unbalanced, but none of her answers indicated that she was suicidal."

"Of course," I say, dropping Loricel's hand. "She was living a lie."

"Perhaps, but, unfortunately, she left nothing behind. We cannot question Valery. If she said nothing to you"—Loricel pauses

meaningfully, as though she's waiting for me to contradict this—"then we will never know."

Even though I'm telling her the truth, Loricel's gaze is so penetrating that I start to feel guilty. Shifting back on the divan, I press my lips together, trying to think of a way to change topics. "So are you going to train me?" I ask.

"You do not need training," she says.

"But you said—"

"I am buying you time." Her piercing look gives way to one of exasperation.

It only makes me feel worse. Loricel's given everything for Arras, but I'm so selfish that she doesn't expect me to sacrifice myself. All I can think to say is thank you.

"Now go use it," she says, shooing me out of the studio.

I slip out of the tower and past the guard. He looks at me closely, the way men regard a weakling. The last thing I need is for him to send for an escort.

"Loricel sent me for something in the lower studios," I lie.

I'm certain he doesn't believe me from the way his eyes squint together, but he lets me go.

I rush back toward my quarters before anyone can reach me. Loricel might not believe Cormac is responsible for Enora's death, but I saw what he did to her. Even if she felt trapped here, she wasn't desperate. She seemed happy obsessively picking each outfit I wore, right down to the shoes. And she was so protective of me. She cared too much about me to just abandon me. She'd even gone to all the trouble of getting me a digifile when I had to travel around Arras, and she had warned me about Erik.

The digifile!

Suddenly the elevator seems to slow down and the buttons light up for each floor in slow motion. Five more left. Four. I hate living so high up! As soon as the doors open I dash out. The digifile is resting safely under my pillow, and I snatch it up.

Sliding my fingers across the screen, I frantically open folders and programs. There are games. Catalogs. An application that patches me into the daily weather programming for each sector. Nothing. It was only

a gift. It’s stupid to be so disappointed. Loricel’s pushing had me believing Enora cared enough to—I don’t know—tell me why, or at least say goodbye or something.

“It can’t be,” I mutter. Erik and Jost were so surprised to see me carrying the device on that trip—it must mean something. I wish I could go to Jost now and ask why they acted that way, but that would draw attention to him.

I pick the digifile back up and start combing through the programs more slowly. *A weather program*. I think back to the first time I met Enora, when she caught me weaving a thunderstorm. Scanning through the weather application, I find a file labeled *Precipitation*. The rest of the program is organized by date and month. I press down on the file and wait for it to load, my heart pounding at the possibility of answers or information. Even a simple farewell.

Inside there’s another file, marked *Thunder*. I open it and a dozen smaller files appear. The first reads, *To Adelice*.

TWENTY

I PULL OUT EVERY TAILORED SUIT in my wardrobe and hang them on my bathroom door. The digifile slips into most of the tiny pockets on each jacket, but I have to rip the basting stitches out of some. No matter what, I'm keeping the small pad with me from now on. I've renamed Enora's note for added safety. At least now I know where to start, even if not much else is clear.

The digifile contains information that I'm pretty sure could get me killed. Maps. Tracking systems. But it's Enora's note that burns in my brain. I think I could stand to have them find every thing in those folders but that. It's too personal. But even though I've read it so many times I have it memorized, I can't bring myself to erase it. It plays on repeat in my head, spoken in Enora's soft voice. Her written words sound so much like her that reading them makes me hurt like I'll break into pieces.

Dear Adelice,

If you found this by accident, close this file. Nothing in here will do you any good, and you know I won't like it if you get into trouble!

But if you came looking for it that means you're ready for answers. I assume you'd come to me in person. So first of all, I'm sorry for leaving you. I wish I could prove to you that I fought to stay. I suppose it doesn't matter anyway, but now that I'm gone the only person you can trust is Loricel. Please believe that she will help you when you need it.

That said, there are answers you have been searching for, and you should find them on your own. I've given you everything I can to help you do this, but protect these files or I'm afraid they'll come after you.

And finally, Adelice, don't be sad for me. I'm free, and it is my sincerest wish that you will be as well. That's why I've fought to protect you, and it's why I'm giving this to you now. You're a smart girl. Keep your wits and trust your instincts, and you'll be fine. And don't ever forget who you are.

With love,
Enora

Her words offer small comfort, but they do give me hope. I choose a lavender suit to wear to dinner, and I'm sliding on the clingy skirt when there's a knock at the door. Shimmying into the jacket, I stash the digifile in my left pocket, right below my heart.

Cormac's at the door. This can't be good.

"Come in," I say, trying to keep the tremble out of my voice and failing. I giggle a little, hoping I look like the nervous, awestruck girls that made up my cohort. Although it may be a little late to go fanatic on him.

He enters without a word and wanders around the perimeter of my room, stopping to finger the suits hung over my door. "Packing?"

"No," I say, grabbing the clothing to shove back into my closet. "I like to plan my wardrobe for the week."

"On Wednesday?" he asks, calling my bluff.

I stuff the suits in with my other dresses and slam the doors to the wardrobe closed. Taking a deep breath, I whirl around to face him. "Can I help you with something?"

"No," he says with a shrug. "It occurred to me I've never seen your quarters."

"Here they are."

"Amazing what technology can do," he murmurs. "Did you know that each room in the high tower is woven to appeal to the Spinster assigned to it? It's very time-consuming to do so, but we want you to be happy here."

"I love my room," I tell him, and it's the truth. The cozy room with plush, oversized cushions is my home. It's the first place that has ever belonged only to me. But I would trade it for the cramped bedroom I shared with Amie in a heartbeat.

"It's nice," he says, glancing around him. "Not my taste exactly. I tend toward a more modern look."

He drifts over to sit on the edge of my bed, and I make a mental note to send for fresh linens as soon as he's left.

"Can I order something for you?" I ask.

"Martini. Neat."

I repeat this to the companel—having no idea what a neat martini is—and make sure the kitchen staff knows it's for Cormac. Then I wait by the

door for it to arrive. It comes with the customary speed of anything meant for an official, and I let the valet bring it to Cormac.

Taking a seat in a chair by the hearth, I start counting each breath I take and release. I get to twenty before he speaks.

“No doubt Loricel warned you about the remap,” Cormac says, but he doesn’t wait for me to confirm this. “I want you to know there are other options.”

“And the price?” I ask, keeping my eyes level with his.

“See that’s what I like about you—all business.”

Something in the way he says “like” sends me recoiling back into my chair, but I keep my mouth shut.

“The Guild needs to know that you can be counted on to serve the people of Arras,” he says, setting his drink on the tray. “Right now your loyalty is debatable.”

“I haven’t done anything to make them question me,” I say in a voice that dares him to deny it.

“You ran,” he reminds me.

“My parents forced me to run, and I was scared enough to listen to them.”

“So otherwise you would have come here and been a good girl?” he asks with a smirk.

“I guess we’ll never know.” It’s true I didn’t immediately go to the door when they came, because I expected my father to. I thought they’d cry, and I’d look scared, but I was planning to leave with the retrieval squad. There was no other option in my head until I was pushed into that tunnel.

“You were never meant to fall in line,” Cormac says, standing and walking to the fireplace, which is steps from my seat. Leaning on the mantel, he hovers over me, and I shrink farther into my chair.

“So how do I prove myself?” I ask. Or at least buy myself some time?

“Do you know yet why a Creweler is so integral to the continuation of Arras?” he asks.

I’m confused by the sudden shift in conversation, but I regurgitate what I’ve learned from Enora and Loricel.

He puts up a hand to halt my description. “Yes, that’s what a Creweler does, but why we need her is something else entirely.”

“To protect the innocent,” I murmur.

“Yes, but such a concept is vague to someone too young to know true tragedy,” he says.

My parents. Enora. My sister rewoven into a stranger. How can he suggest I don’t know about tragedy?

He watches my reaction to this proclamation, but when I don’t respond, he wets his lips with his tongue before he continues. “You think you know loss, but before Arras and the Guild of Twelve, wars spilled blood all over the Earth. Entire generations of young men died so that other men could gain more power.”

I bite my tongue and stare back at him. Loricel has already told me all of this, but to my astonishment, I realize that he believes what he’s saying. As though he’s different from those evil men.

“Dictators murdered women and children for having different skin colors or holding different beliefs.” He pauses and moves a step closer to my chair. “Because we didn’t have the capacity to control peace.”

Control—the word that haunts me. That’s the true difference between Earth and Arras. Men like Cormac can remove taints and troublemakers and differences much more efficiently than our ancestors on Earth.

“And are your choices better than theirs?” I ask, gripping the arms of my chair firmly.

“I make choices for the good of the many,” Cormac says, but his eyes flash and he switches tactics. “In Arras, we ensure food is administered and available to everyone. There’s no risk of famine. We control the weather and avoid the dangers of too little water as well as the hazards of unregulated weather conditions. In the past, humanity was at the whim of nature, but now nature serves us.”

“Perhaps there was a purpose to the natural order of things,” I say in a soft voice, but he ignores me.

“Families don’t watch their loved ones decline and individuals are free from the fear of unexpected death,” he continues. “We’ve cured most serious illnesses with renewal technology—”

“And the ones you haven’t?”

“Our citizens are relieved from their pain,” he says without missing a beat.

“You mean you kill them,” I accuse.

“We remove them from a conscious state where they would exist in pain. We’ve streamlined the burdens of old age.”

My hand aches where my grandmother’s fierce grip clasped it, and I shake my head at his lies. There’s no way he’s younger than she was. The Guild’s interest lies in removing the unnecessary matter in the weave. “Have you ever lost anyone?” I ask.

“Not the same way you have,” he admits, “but you should know better than anyone the pain of unexpected death.”

“Unexpected death” is such a political way to put it. “No, have you ever lost anyone to removal?” I clarify.

“We don’t lose in removal. We control,” he says, his jaw muscles twitching. He’s a bit too fond of that word. “And yes, I had both my parents and my wife removed.”

“Wife?” I gasp. Cormac Patton: the ultimate bachelor. The idea of him settled down with one woman is incomprehensible.

“I was married when I was very young,” he says in a casual tone. “As you know, it’s expected that citizens form domestic units by age eighteen. I was no exception.”

Except that he’s always been the exception. The man flashes across the Stream with a fresh new girl at every Guild event. He’s the guy my father half-jokingly referred to as a lucky bastard every time we tuned in.

I try to picture the type of woman he’d marry. In my head, she’s a cross between Maela and one of the vapid rebound stewardesses. Insipid and evil—Cormac’s perfect cocktail. “What happened to her?” I ask him.

“She fell ill before renewal technology caught up to certain psychological ailments. I chose not to prolong her suffering.” His tone is detached; he’s stating facts, but the muscles in his jaw tense and the veins from there to his shoulders go taut. This isn’t something he wants to talk about, which makes it the number one thing I want to discuss.

“But she wasn’t dying,” I say, my lip trembling.

“No,” he says, “but she was not a functioning member of Arras, and her condition prevented me from serving the Guild to my full capacity.”

I turn my head, afraid my eyes will give away my burning disgust. He got rid of her so he could advance politically and enjoy the benefits of being a widowed bachelor. “I guess that’s why you enjoy casual relationships with so many women,” I say in a cold voice.

“That’s the thing, Adelice. The time has come for the family unit to be promoted again in Arras,” he says, switching on his politician’s smile.

“I wasn’t aware it had stopped being promoted,” I say, thinking of the marriage profiles advertised in the daily *Bulletin*. By now I would be attending courting appointments and searching for a compatible match. The thought sends a tremor through my chest as I imagine the life I never had.

My jibe only launches him into more rhetoric. “Our laws help us maintain the family, but there are an increasing number of unnatural threats to the traditional family dynamic.”

Like Enora.

“We contain these dangerous proclivities as best we can, but the fact is that a number of dismissed women have refused to marry according to age regulations. In the Eastern Sector, this trend is spreading, and now young men aren’t even advertising marriage profiles,” he tells me.

“And you let them?” I say, not hiding my surprise. “When the Guild has such persuasive methods at its disposal?” Is this the taint I heard him discussing, or just a symptom of a larger sense of discontent?

“Frankly, after Enora’s stunt, I’m concerned about the safety of our current methods. The process may have damaged her. The remains of her thread barely held together when we removed them from the weave. It might surprise you to learn we don’t want to remap the entire female population.”

“But *you* would, though,” I accuse, my blood boiling.

“Of course, there’s nothing I wouldn’t do for the good of Arras,” he says, dropping his gaze to meet mine. “Someday you’ll understand this. Right now you can’t see past yourself. If girls stop marrying—if, Arras forbid, they live on their own—we can’t protect them.”

“So you’re doing it to keep women safe?” I ask.

“Yes. When expectations are clear, they are easily met, but when we begin to bend the rules, we invite discord.”

I actually think Cormac believes what he’s saying, but I’ve seen the effects of these stringent rules. My mother being refused more children, our carefully segregated neighborhoods, Enora trying to live a lie. Was quiet desperation the price of surface happiness? “Maybe they aren’t ready to get married,” I say. “I wouldn’t have been.”

Cormac presses his lips together and watches me for a moment before responding. “I’m sorry to hear that, Adelice, because the Guild has decided the best way to address this concern is to provide an example to these young women.”

“What kind of example?” I ask. I keep my voice steady.

“The Guild has enjoyed success with most Eligibles through the elite treatment and privilege afforded Spinsters,” he continues. “They’re excited to be taken to the Coventry.”

My pulse pounds in my ears, drowning out all the ambient noise. Only Cormac’s practiced, smooth voice funnels through, like a mandatory Stream broadcast. “So it makes sense to give young women an example of perfect domestic tranquility. We’ll market it the same way we do coming to the Coventry—that being married is a life of privilege. And we’ll use someone from the Coventry as an example.”

“But Spinsters can’t …” I’m too embarrassed to say it out loud.

“Consummate the relationship?” he asks, a smirk playing at his lips.

I give a small nod, but keep my eyes on my feet.

“You’re not stupid,” he says with a trace of annoyance. “You can’t possibly believe the whole purity-standards bit.”

“Then why tell us that?” More blood rushes to my face and settles on my cheeks. Generally, I don’t consider myself dumb, but I had, in fact, always believed the “whole purity-standards bit.”

“Family, Adelice. We can’t have young women running around town. We need them at home, having babies, and serving Arras. And I’m sure you know women here—”

“But it takes away our skills.”

“You’ve seen some action since you’ve been here,” he accuses, “and you’re still weaving.”

The flush of my cheeks deepens. So much for being discreet. “I never crossed any lines.”

“Maybe so,” he says, but he shrugs as though he’s unconvinced.

“So you’re going to allow Spinsters to marry?” I ask, feeling a bit dizzy.

“No,” he assures me. “We need Spinsters to remain dedicated to their work, and our philosophy that a wife’s first duty is to her husband would be undermined by such a policy change.”

I exhale in relief. The thought of being forced into a marriage, of making Jost live through that … I can't imagine a worse torture.

"But a Creweler can be afforded special privileges," he says, and my heart jumps back into my throat.

"You … want … me … to … marry?"

"Consider it an order," he says with a smile.

"Or you'll remap me," I whisper. "Do I get to choose?" I struggle to hang on to the faint flicker of hope this thought offers me. No one could object to Jost. He might not like the constant grooming. But as much as I try to believe it's possible, even if it were, I'd be putting him directly under the Guild's thumb. No matter how much it may hurt him, it would be better if I were married to someone else.

"I don't think that's a good idea, do you?" he asks with a cocked eyebrow. "Your choices aren't as well conceived as the Guild would like."

"So you'll choose for me?" I ask slowly. No doubt it will be a political match.

"We already have." He flashes a blinding smile. "Me."

The blood rushing in my head drains out, and I grip the arms of my chair to stay upright.

Marry Cormac?

"I'm only sixteen," I whisper.

"We'll wait for you to turn seventeen as custom dictates in the larger metros," he says in a casual voice.

I struggle to make sense of what he's telling me. I stand to look out the window. "But how old are you?"

Cormac scowls. "Renewal tech makes that a nonissue," he says through clenched teeth.

"Not for me."

"What? You think you can go out and marry some young pretty boy?" he asks, his voice rising steadily. "Let me make this clear: it has been decided. The Guild wants assurance that you're being tightly monitored."

"And you're just the man to do that," I say, narrowing my eyes.

"You'll enjoy the same privileges and get to have children."

I choke back the stomach acid this statement sends shooting up my throat. "You can have kids?"

“Of course,” he says, straightening his tux jacket. “My genetic materials have been safely stored since I was a younger man.”

Much younger. Of all the possibilities I mourned when I was brought to the Coventry, having babies was not on that list.

“So I’ll be”—I search for the word, my thoughts moving too fast for me to latch onto them—“impregnated.” My only solace is that if I can’t escape, traditional methods of procreation won’t be necessary. Although lying back on a medic table and letting some …

“Our biogenetics team has created a patch that will ensure I can procreate much the same as any young father.” His black eyes gleam as he speaks.

I back slowly away from him. The thought of his body bearing down on my own—his aseptic stench smothering me—steals my breath, and I gasp.

“And if I refuse?” I ask, barely containing the hysteria I feel building in my chest.

“We remap you,” he says with an edge in his voice, “and then you marry me.”

I cross my arms over my chest, clutching my shoulders, and shake my head. “I’ll do anything you want except that,” I beg, hot tears spilling down my cheeks. “I’ll be Creweler. I’ll be good.”

“I’d hoped you would see reason,” he snarls, moving toward me. “I would have preferred a wife with some spirit, but I’ll remap you and marry you next week if I choose to.”

He’s shaking me now, but I can only sob. “Please. Please. Please.”

My pleas are breathless, lost in his gruff attack.

“Did you think,” he says, his voice full of disdain, “we would let you run wild, screwing around with the servants and playing dress-up? Arras demands your service, Adelice.”

I wrench my arms free and fly from the room. Cormac doesn’t follow me. He’ll find me eventually; he knows there’s no need to exert extra effort now. Scrambling into the stairwell, where I’m protected from the view of security monitors, I tear at time and weave myself into safety. When I’m sure the moment is secure, I collapse onto the cold, hard landing and stare at the hourglass my father burned onto my wrist. How can I remember who I am if they’re determined to take it from me?

I’m out of time. Even if I can break out of the compound, Cormac will hunt me down. I think of Loricel’s resignation to her impending death, and for the first time I truly understand the relief she must feel. I wish I were dead.

I stay there, trapped in my own web, unable to move. There’s only one person powerful enough to help me now, but even she has nowhere to run.

I go to her anyway.

TWENTY-ONE

THE CREWELER'S STUDIO WALLS ARE BLANK, and the loom sits empty. Loricel must be at dinner with the others. Maybe they'll assume I'm with Cormac and not come looking for me. The screens in the room reflect the default program, and I take a deep breath and consider where I should look first. I only have to tell the walls where I want to be and the tracking program will display that place. These walls can show me anywhere in Arras, but I'm not sure how long I have with them, so I better make my time count.

"I am in the great hall at dinner," I command, feeling a little silly.

The walls shimmer and the great hall weaves itself across the space. I stand in the dead center, the table stretching out around me. At the far end Loricel sits, speaking to no one. Meanwhile the other Spinsters make lively conversation that I can't hear. Each woman's skin is a pale version of its natural color—chalk white or dusted chocolate or muted honey. I watch as one girl throws her head back, and in my own I hear a maniacal cackle as others clap and wave their hands in exaggerated gesticulations. This is how they close their day: at a long table filled with puddings and roast meat and delicate breads filled with sweet cream. A few gulp down thin red wine. One snaps her fingers and a young man appears to refill it. His face is blank, except for the dullest hint of disgust in his electric-blue eyes.

I stare at him. Dressed in his evening suit, he bears little resemblance to the scruffy boy who carried me across that stone cell, but his eyes are the same as the day we met, the day he bandaged my hands, the day we kissed. I have to turn away or I'll rip right through the wall to get into his arms.

All around, eyes fix on me. I feel exposed, but then I realize I'm standing in the spot where the main dish will be placed, a large ham or turkey or duck. One by one, the Spinsters seated near this spot begin reaching out toward me, their hands returning with knives and forks full of steaming, white meat. *I'm being eaten alive*.

I bite my lip to keep from laughing and focus on what I now know. I have located both Jost and Loricel. I want to follow Jost, but this is my only chance to find the information I need to get to Amie if I want to pull her location up on the loom.

"Show me the offices," I command, and the scene shifts to a busy building where smartly dressed men and women bustle about with stacks of papers. It's a scene outside the Coventry. My command must have been too vague.

"Show me the offices inside the Coventry," I try, and the image flickers to nothing.

Pulling the digifile from my pocket, I slide open the secret file and am delighted to discover that Enora included a map of the compound. I shift the image, searching until I find what I'm looking for: the research laboratories. Next to them I spot a single room twice their size. It's marked REPOSITORY. They're both located near the clinic where I was mapped. Calling up the labs on the wall, I see a few men clad in white jumpsuits busily working with tubes and looms. Their workday must not end at the traditional time. I close my eyes and mutter, "Repository."

I can't look. Something about the large block on the map raises the hair on my neck. Slowly I open my eyes. Large steel shelves rise up in neat, symmetrical rows, lined with thousands of tiny metal boxes. Moving closer, I examine them to find each is labeled with a sequence of fourteen numbers and letters. It takes me a moment to realize I've stopped breathing.

Fourteen.

03212144 WR LM LA

The sequence drilled into my head as a child.

"It's how we'll find you if you're ever lost," my mother said.

It's how they find each of us.

Date of birth. Sector. Metro. Mother's initials. Child's initials.

I stare at the box in front of me. Whose sequence is this?

My hand reaches out to open it, but my fingers hit the wall screen.

"It's an illusion," I remind myself. The screens look so vivid that for a moment I thought I could reach out and riffle through the boxes.

I nearly drop the digifile from my sweaty hands, trying to find the information on the map, but thankfully it's there: a list of coordinates that will call up the Coventry's weave on the machine. Sitting at the loom, I punch in the codes and watch as the Coventry's weave spins across it. Next to me the command panel blinks red, flashing a reminder: partial within boundary diameter. It means I'm looking at a piece of the weave that contains the very location I'm in. Maela showed us this piece before, but I wonder now, as the warning light flashes at me, if I'm risking its stability to manipulate the compound from within the compound itself. But I can't think of a better—or safer—idea. And, I argue to myself, why would Enora have given me this info if I wasn't meant to use it? But … if I'm being honest, this is possibly the stupidest plan ever. I'm not sure if it's possible to remove a piece from the loom's weave and place it into the room's actual weave. Probably because no one has ever been desperate enough to try it. Except me.

I run my hands along the top of the loom, the weave shocking the tips of my damaged fingers. Slowing them to a soft trailing motion, I adjust the view on the loom, zooming into the weave until it focuses, mirroring the map Enora left me on the digifile, and then I see the outline of the repository. Keeping my fingertip carefully on the spot, I tease a few strands of the area out, carefully, so as not to remove the entire room from the weave, which would surely draw immediate suspicion. Holding it delicately in my left hand, I reach up into the air with my right, and concentrating until the room's weave shimmers into view, I draw apart the strands of this room, hoping my theory is correct and that I can transplant threads from the loom into the weave of Loricel's studio. If so, then I hope to create a rift between her studio and the repository that will allow me to enter the secure facility. I weave the strands from the repository into this space and cautiously peek through.

It's not a bad first try, except that I've woven it in upside down and I'm looking at the ceiling, the storage units suspended overhead. There's no way I can open those boxes this way, so I step back through to Loricel's studio and fix it.

There's a faint hum filling the other room, and I shiver as I step through. It's at least thirty degrees colder in here than any other space in

the compound. I pull my jacket tighter and step up to the nearest shelf; there's only one way to find out what's in there.

The boxes latch on the right side, and I have to try twice to raise the tiny lever. In response, the front of it slides away, revealing a small crystal cube. I reach in to pull it out. A thin strand of light shimmers, suspended in the center and woven into a delicate knot. I turn it over in my hands and the thread doesn't move. It's too thin to belong to the person with this identifying sequence. I've seen individual threads after removal, and they're comprised of several strings knit together; I'm sure that this is only part of the ripped thread. On the bottom, I notice an etched code composed of a series of numbers and varying bars. Sliding my digifile next to it, I open a folder labeled *Tracking* and press the small screen up to the code. A pulsing icon flashes immediately and then a new dataset appears:

NAME: Riccard Blane

PERSONAL IDENTIFYING SEQUENCE: 06022103 EN BH BR

OCCUPATION: banker

REMOVAL DATA: 10112158 EN

REQUEST CONTACT: Amolia Blane

RELATION: wife

CURRENT STATUS: active

Active?

The strand is too thin to be the banker's remains. If he was removed two years ago, why is he listed as active? I hold the cube up to the repository lights, but no new information appears. I save the dataset to the digifile to study later and place the cube back in the box.

I tiptoe down the narrow aisle, afraid even my light footfalls might attract attention in this section of the compound. As I get farther from my entry point, I begin to worry. What if Loricel returns to her studio, or someone else walks into the repository? Starting to head back to investigate closer to the rift, I glimpse the shelves one row over. Squat metal rectangles, not square boxes, compose these units. I dart quickly to them. Each is labeled with an identifying sequence, but there's no storage

cube inside. Instead a thin plastic card pops out of the cubby. Fumbling with the digifile, I scan the card and wait as the dataset loads.

NAME: Annelin Mayz

PERSONAL IDENTIFYING SEQUENCE: 11262158 NU MG MA

ALTERATION DATA: 12162159 NU

RELOCATION: EN

REQUEST CONTACT: Officer Jem Blythe

KIN: none / permanent removal

CURRENT STATUS: healthy

The file includes a picture of a young girl. According to her PIS, she's only two years old now. This is what I've been looking for: records of children who have been rewoven to foster families. Amie's information will be in here, too. I push Annelin's card back into the cubby and bump the latch on the next file. The small door slides open, and before I can close the lever, the next card ejects all the way out. Reaching down I pick up the card and scan it. Maybe there's a pattern to the alterations. The first line of the dataset stops me in my tracks. Although it's not Amie.

It's Sebrina Bell.

Bell.

I jam the buttons linked to the attached image files. The girl in this image is an infant, her cheeks both dimpled and a wisp of dark curls falling across her forehead. She seems too little to smile, but she is grinning like she's staring at someone she adores. Someone like her father. Her eyes are a sparkling, deep blue. I know those eyes instantly. They must run in the family.

It's Jost's daughter—the one who disappeared right before his eyes. I choke back a sob. Clutching the card to my chest, I scan through the data on the digifile:

NAME: Sebrina Bell

PERSONAL IDENTIFYING SEQUENCE: 02262158 ES BR BS

ALTERATION DATA: 05282158 ES

RELOCATION: EN

REQUEST CONTACT: Ambassador Cormac Patton

KIN: father/abandoned

mother / permanent removal / deceased

CURRENT STATUS: healthy

NOTES: New personal identifying sequence to be assigned due to collateral removal

All the resentment I've felt toward Cormac bubbles up and mixes with this information. I slip the card into my pocket and lean against the shelf trying to slow my ragged breathing. I'll save the file in a minute, I still have to find Amie.

July 24th. Her sequence begins with 0724. The other girls' information was filed according to the sector of relocation. I scan each row of files until I find the cubes for the Northern Sector. Rushing down the row, I scan the tiny compartments, watching the numbers build in size. I've reached 0618 when I hear a door click to the north of me. I hold my breath as the tap of dress heels echoes in the silent room.

Creeping to the edge of this unit, I peer around the corner. No one. Snaking along the side, I steadily move back to the opening I've left between the repository and Loricel's studio.

The door clicks open again. I wait, praying the intruder is gone, but instead I hear another person call out and the first person heads back toward the door. I press against the side of a shelf, not daring to move forward. Two male voices echo through the room, but I don't pay attention to what they're saying. I hear their footsteps coming nearer to my hiding spot. I slip to the next set of shelves and wait breathlessly, gauging how close they are to me now. Then to the next. And the next.

I've reached the rift when one of them shouts. My hand grips the card in my pocket; I forgot to shut the door to its cubby. I throw myself through the rift as the repository lights brighten; they're looking for me. Pulling the repository's threads from the spot where I wove it into the fabric of Loricel's room, I clutch the strands against my chest. As soon as I've put the strands back in their place, completing the repository in the compound's weave, the loom whirs to life and dismisses the piece. I drop to the chair and listen for approaching guards. No one knows I can do this except Loricel, but how long before someone becomes suspicious?

And even if they aren’t looking for me, this is the first place they’ll come to find out who’s responsible.

But when no one appears, I relax. It’s only then I notice her lounging on her sedan, stroking a fluffy ginger cat. “Loricel,” I gasp. It comes out in a gurgle of apology and surprise.

“Go.”

Her eyes won’t meet mine.

“Loricel, I—”

“Leave me alone, Adelice. I need to think.”

I start to ask what she means, but she answers the question before I speak. “I have to figure out how to cover this up.”

“I’m sorry,” I say, lifting my eyes from the floor to meet hers.

She keeps her gaze on the cat and continues to pet it. After a moment, she asks, “Did you find what you were looking for?”

The tiny plastic card feels like a piece of lead in my pocket, but I shake my head.

“You endanger your sister by drawing attention to her,” she warns, looking at me for the first time.

“I need to know where she is,” I say.

“Cormac showed you your sister, alive and well,” Loricel says. “It’s best to leave it at that, unless …”

“I’m not going after her.” Not yet.

“If he perceives her as a threat, Cormac will remove her.” Loricel pushes the cat off her lap and stands.

It takes me a moment to realize she’s reading the coordinates I’ve left on the companel. “Ingenious plan,” she says, “but I wonder how you found the coordinates to pull the repository’s weave up on my loom.”

I bite my lip and clutch my arm around my waist, hoping she can’t make out the digifile’s silhouette in my pocket.

“I’m not going to tell on you, Adelice,” she says, turning to stare at the false wall. “I told you this was your choice, and I meant it. But you’re playing a dangerous game.”

My mouth is dry. “I’m not playing a game,” I say.

“All the same, be more careful.”

She says nothing else, so I exit the room, arms still wrapped around my waist, guarding my secrets: the truth about Jost’s daughter, and a

small patch of the weave from the studio’s screen.

TWENTY-TWO

I MANAGE TO SNEAK PAST THE GUARD, who's busy smoking a few meters from the door to the upper studios, but I don't return to my quarters. As soon as I'm out of his sight, I shift into a confident stride, lowering my arms to my sides and straightening my back. There's surveillance on me, and I don't want to raise any suspicion. With trembling fingers, I remove the piece of the screen from Loricel's wall from my pocket and hide it in my palm. It's only a few inches wide and featherlight, but it reflects a bit of the default scenery of the studio walls.

I say only one word: "Jost."

An image flickers in my hand and I take quick glances at it. Long steel tables run the length of the room and girls in short fitted dresses carry trays of dishes to deep metal basins at the wall. Standing in a far corner, Jost directs a group of boys. As soon as they disappear from the scene, Jost closes his eyes and pinches the bridge of his nose. He looks tired as he leans against the far wall and I'm about to add to his stress. But if I don't tell him now, I may not ever have the strength. With my free hand I draw out the digifile and consult the map. I'm right above the kitchen. For one moment, I consider turning around. I've already ruined everything between us, and nothing will be the same once he knows about Sebrina. But I think of Amie, and although it's not the same, I know I can't keep this from him. Moving to the right, I duck into the nearest stairwell. I don't even have time to think of what I'll say before the stairs deposit me near the doorway.

The maid nearest me whips her head around and stares at me, her mouth hanging open. Several others stop their dish-washing, but only one wipes her soapy hands on her apron and comes over to me.

"Miss?" she says, running her eyes over me doubtfully. "Can I help you?"

"I need to speak with the head valet," I say, raising my chin as regally as I can muster.

She purses her lips and squints meaningfully at me. "Jost?"

“If that’s his name,” I say, waving her off dismissively. I feel like a total bitch, but the more I act like a Spinster, the less curious they’re going to get.

The maid curtsies once and heads back toward the food gens, but I catch her rolling her eyes at another girl, who giggles. One look at my face and the smile drops from hers, and she rushes back to work. They must hate me.

Jost peeks around a door in the back and his eyes widen a bit, but he keeps his expression blank. He exchanges some words with the maid I sent and then walks toward me.

“Can I help you?” he asks. There’s not even a hint of friendliness in his voice.

“Yes, I need your services,” I say, gesturing to indicate that he should follow.

“I can send one of my men with you,” he offers, his eyes flat. “I have other responsibilities. I’m not here for your amusement.”

“I was specifically told to get you,” I repeat.

A few of the girls around us slow their work to eavesdrop on our exchange.

“In the future, you can use a companel to send for assistance,” Jost says, turning to leave me.

“I don’t think I’ll be needing assistance in the future.”

This stops him. To the others I’m sure my angry words sound spoiled and petty, but Jost knows me too well to dismiss them—even if he wants to.

“Lead the way,” he says with a sigh.

In the stairwell, I stop him. “We need to talk.”

“I’m listening,” he says, crossing his arms against his chest.

“Somewhere private,” I whisper.

Jost unfolds his arms and takes a deep breath. A muscle twitches in his neck, but he nods and takes me down to the basement. As we duck through a second door, I recognize the cold paving stones.

“It’s been too long,” I murmur, trailing my hand along the moist rock wall that makes up the cell area.

Jost leads me into a cell and pulls out a small handlight. It casts a harsh glow in the room. He leans against a wall and raises one eyebrow.

“I know I hurt you—”

“No,” he says. “I can tell by the way you say it. You don’t know, Adelice.”

“I was protecting you.” I move closer to him.

“I don’t need you to protect me.”

“You’re such a man. Can’t trust a girl do anything.”

I try to turn away, but he catches my wrist.

“I don’t need you to protect me,” he repeats softly. “I need you to trust me.”

“I do trust you, idiot,” I snap.

“Then let me in,” he says, pulling me closer.

“There’s more going on here than you and me,” I say, inhaling the smell of him—smoke and sweat, something sweet like honeysuckle. I want to pull the strands around us and trap us like this forever. Safe and content, if not happy. I’m not sure happiness is possible for us anymore.

“Maybe,” he whispers into my hair. “But that’s their problem. We need to worry about you and me.”

“There can’t be a you and me here,” I say. My whole body is cocooned in his arms, and I press my head to his chest and listen to his steady heartbeat.

“Here is all we have,” he says, drawing my face up to meet his eyes. The electricity is back, and it threatens to overwhelm in its intensity.

Jost leans down to kiss me, but I pull away.

“We won’t even have that for long,” I say in a soft voice.

His arms drop from around me, and I straighten up, fighting the urge to burrow into his chest.

“Why are you here?” he asks, barely controlling the rage in his voice.

I tell him what I’ve learned about Enora and how they plan to remap me. About what I’ve learned from Loricel about Earth and the mantle of Arras. As I speak, the coldness fades from his face, and by the time I tell him about Cormac’s last visit, his hand has found mine again.

“I’m sorry,” he says, interrupting my tale. “I’ve been unfair.”

I shake my head. “I deserved it.”

“You were doing what you thought was best and I—”

“Jost,” I butt in, sensing the guilt building in his voice. “It’s in the past.”

It’s tender and sincere, and maybe it’s not everything I want to say about how confused but hopeful I feel. It’s not the questions I want to ask or even the one thing I think I want to tell him, but it’s enough.

He breaks into a wide smile and wraps his arms around me.

“You’re right.”

This time I let him kiss me. It starts slowly, but I press closer to him and clutch his shoulders. He holds my waist, and then his hands, warm and strong, move slowly up my back. Everywhere they touch, my body sings out for more. His lips are soft, but I demand more, sliding my arms tight against his neck and pulling him closer. He responds, his mouth opening against mine, and I feel a tremor run through my body. Finally he pulls back, our foreheads still touching, and we breathe in quick pants against one another. His breath is hot on my face, and I struggle to remember what I came to tell him.

“We have to leave.” I force the words out before I give in to the ache building up in my chest that begs for the touch of his lips again.

“Where can we go?” he asks, straightening up but leaving his hands on my back.

“I’m still working on that.”

“But you only have a few days,” Jost says, kissing the top of my head.

“I could weave a moment,” I say, still pressed up against his neck.

“And never leave?”

“Something like that.”

“Do I need to tell you why that won’t work?”

I pull out of his arms and sigh. “That’s what the Guild did, and here we are,” I point out.

“On a much larger scale,” he says, “and it’s not going too well.”

“I know. I can’t leave without finding Amie anyway.”

“Amie’s safe,” he says, weaving his hand through mine.

I want to believe him as much as I long to run away with him and forget everything I know about the Guild. But I can’t leave Amie in Cypress, and I know he only suggests it because he doesn’t have anything else to lose, except me. That’s about to change though. “Would you leave someone you loved?” I ask, fingering the digifile in my pocket with my free hand. “If I leave, the Guild might …”

It’s too terrible to even consider.

“Why? Out of petty revenge? They have no reason to hurt her.”

“Cormac said something once,” I confide. “He thinks she might be useful. They’re hoping she has my abilities.”

“But they’ve never proven weaving is genetic.”

“I know that, but it won’t stop them from taking her. I’m not saying I have to get to her right now, but I have to keep track of her until I know what to do.” Without realizing it, I’ve grabbed a handful of Jost’s shirt, and I’m tugging on it. He loosens my hand gently and takes it in his own.

“There’s nowhere for us to go,” he reminds me. “They’ll just pull our sequences, and even if you could weave out a moment, how long before they break through that?”

“I don’t know,” I say. Loricel had said it was inevitable, but it’s the only plan I can come up with.

“We need more time,” he grumbles.

“Good thing you’re with a Creweler,” I say, giving him a half smile.

“How will you find Amie anyway? It could take you decades to comb the weave looking for her.”

“I know her sequence, but the geographic locators will be different. They change that information when they perform an alteration,” I explain.

“But even if you had her information, you don’t have the clearance to pull by personal identifying sequence, do you?” he asks.

“No, but Loricel does,” I say.

“And you think she’ll let you do that?” His tone is doubtful.

“I wasn’t going to ask. How do you think I got this information?”

“We need a better plan than this,” he mutters. He drops my hands and runs his through his tangled brown hair.

“I haven’t told you everything,” I admit, but as much as I want to blurt out what I’ve found, I find myself holding back. I could ignore his past, because time separated us from it, but now that distance would be removed.

He narrows his eyes and takes a breath. “Let me have it.”

“I know how to find Amie.” My hand closes around the digifile, and I pull it out of my pocket.

“Didn’t Enora give you that?”

“Yes, and she left me some other useful information.” I slide open the weather files and show him the map.

He stares at the digital image, studying it. “Is that the compound?”

I answer with a nod. “Complete with coordinates. And I’ve already broken into the Repository.”

Jost’s head snaps up from the screen. “You did what?”

“I got into the Repository,” I say, trying to act like this is no big deal, because he’s giving me a look that says, *Have you lost your mind?* “I can find her.”

“What’s in the room?” he asks, keeping his eyes on me.

“Datasets. Info on removals and alterations.” I don’t tell him about the thin strands in the cubes or the chills they send through me. It sounds too crazy.

“And you’ve seen them?” he presses.

I nod and slip my hand back into my pocket. The card is still there, but I can’t bring myself to give it to him.

“What did they say?”

“Basic info: ID, removal dates.” I open the first file to show him Riccard Blane’s info. “There’s a tracking program on here that reads the datasets.”

“How do you think Enora got this program?” he asks, pacing the small cell.

I shrug. “She must have had help.”

“I wonder—” he begins.

“There’s something else I have to tell you,” I say, jumping in before I lose my nerve.

He stops and waits.

I stare at him for a moment before speaking. I’m not sure I’ll know the Jost who comes out on the other side of this information. “Here,” I say finally, thrusting the card at him.

Taking it, he looks up at me and frowns. “What’s this?”

“Scan it.” I offer him the digifile.

I hold my breath as the dataset loads, but I know as soon as it has. His brow relaxes and his mouth opens, but he doesn’t say anything. Instead, he simply drops to the ground and stares at the small pad.

“She’s alive,” I say in a soft voice, because he can’t find the words.

Most of the time Jost looks like a boy. Even when he hasn't shaved or is dressed in a tailored suit, the curves of his face are soft and his smile quick. But here in the sharp relief of the handlight, his jaw is angular and the slightest of lines form as he squints, studying the screen. A moment later, when a smile creeps onto his face, it's not the boyish grin I love, but something that bursts from a deeper part of him. He looks like a man.

"You found her," he whispers, and when he looks up that unfathomable smile extends out to me.

"She's safe." For now, I add to myself.

"She's alive," he breathes, as though repeating the words will make them more real. "My daughter is alive."

"Amie's in there, too," I say.

"Can we get back in?" he asks, unable to tear his eyes from the image.

"I think so," I say. "But I'll need your help."

"Anything," he promises.

"Jost," I say, kneeling down to him, "I don't know if we can get to her."

He cups my face and kisses me once. A new energy pulses from his lips. His touch leaves traces of fire along my body as though he's transferred this new vitality to me. I never knew how damaged he was by his loss until now.

"We'll find a way," he says. "We'll find them both."

I nod and gently pull the digifile from his hand. Without it, he snaps back into action, inviting me to share my plan. I explain that I'll need his help getting back into the upper studios, but from there I can break through to the Repository and find more information.

"And then?" he asks.

"Then we'll figure out what to do next," I say. It's a horrible plan, but it's the only one we have.

Jost pretends to escort me through the compound. It's perfectly common for the head valet to chaperon a Spinster, but with Cormac on the prowl, I feel a thin veil of sweat forming across my forehead and on my palms. I do my best to look bored, but my pulse is racing and I can feel heat on my cheeks.

When we reach the security door to the upper studios, the guard runs his eyes over us. "Does he have clearance?"

“Cormac’s ordered me to have an escort at all times,” I say, willing my voice not to quaver.

“I should clear it—”

“Look, man,” Jost says with a groan, pulling away from me. “I’d like to get to bed, so the sooner we can get Her Majesty upstairs the better.”

The guard grins; he must be used to the night shift himself.

“*She’s* clear, so keep close to her,” he orders him.

Jost nods and rolls his eyes a little to seal their camaraderie.

Once we’re through the door, I elbow him. “You can go to bed anytime.”

“Surest way to get around in here,” he says with a wink. “Act annoyed with a Spinster.”

I feign a wounded expression, and his hand tightens around mine.

“You are the least annoying Spinster I’ve met,” he says in mock solemnity.

“Watch yourself, Josten Bell,” I warn him.

He follows me up the spiral staircase, but he keeps looking over his shoulder and nearly tripping into me.

“We’ll never get anywhere if you don’t hurry up,” I hiss at him.

“Sorry, Your Majesty,” he says, grinning.

When we reach the top, I duck into the studio, half expecting Loricel to be sitting there, but it’s empty. Motioning for Jost to join me, I move to the loom and pull out the digifile.

“What are you doing?” he asks, watching over my shoulder.

“I learned a new trick,” I tell him.

The piece of the compound flows gracefully onto the loom, and I turn to Jost to gauge his reaction. “Isn’t it beautiful?”

“What?” he asks, frowning.

“The mantle,” I say, running my finger along the weave.

“I can’t see anything,” he admits sheepishly.

“I’m sorry, I didn’t mean to—”

“Don’t worry about it,” he stops me. “This is your area of expertise.”

I turn my attention to the section on the loom and carefully pull out some of the strands of the repository again. Jost stands behind me quietly, but he moves closer to me when I stand to make the rift between rooms.

With Jost here, I have to focus harder on the room's weave before it comes into focus, but when it does I slip the strands in my hand into it, creating the opening. The repository, silent and dark, stretches out before us.

"How …" Jost asks behind me.

"Good trick, huh?" I can't help enjoying his shock a little. "I took a piece of weave from the loom and inserted it into the weave of the room. I transplanted it to create a passage. It's like when we rebound and a Spinster moves our weave from one spot to another, except I did that with a room."

"Okay, I think I get it," he says. "So we go in there and look?"

I bite my lip and then shake my head. "I want you to stay here and keep guard. If anyone comes, warn me."

And if I get caught, run, I add to myself, hoping he will if the moment arises.

"We should stick together," he says in a firm voice.

"I know how it's organized in there," I tell him. "It will only take me a moment, and I'm quieter than you."

"Not in those," he says, pointing to my feet.

I grimace and slip my heels off my feet. I take a few hops in my stockings to prove my light-footedness, and he squares his shoulders and gives a reluctant nod. Handing him my shoes, I kiss his cheek lightly and slip through the opening.

The room is silent without the hum of lamps, and I hold the digifile in front of me for light. Just in time, because I almost run into the first unit. Skidding past it, I'm suddenly thankful for the slippery stockings. I make my way to the front of the shelves where I found Sebrina's file and begin searching for Amie. The individual units are organized by date according to geographic location. I have to find the Cypress files.

I comb swiftly through this aisle and move on to the next until I find the sequences that include *E,* for the Eastern Sector, and start searching for Cypress. I'm hoping it's not more than that when my finger drifts onto a unit with her date. The rest of the data, including my mother's initials, matches, and I pull out the card and scan the code. I hold my breath while the loading image blinks. And there she is: Amie Lewys.

I can’t bear to look at the information pertaining to why she was rewoven, even if I know it’s mostly lies. I save her dataset to the digifile and carefully slide the card back into storage. I wonder for a moment if taking the files would slow the Coventry down if they went after Sebrina or Amie, but if they have backup files it would be a red flag. I remove Sebrina’s card and tread noiselessly back to where I found it. I have to check the card twice to recall her sequence, since my first discovery was a complete accident. I’m slipping the card back into the cubby when I hear boot steps approaching. The steady clip of the approaching footfall sounds like Jost. I’ve been gone long enough that he might worry, but I’m not about to wait around and find out. Stealing to the side of the unit, I press against it and peek around the corner.

Clear.

I take a deep breath and move to the next set of shelves. The steps have faded away and after checking the next aisle I dart quickly back toward the rift. I’m only a few shelves from it when I see it shimmering and fading. I barely glimpse Jost on the other side as hands reach out from the other side and pull on the tear. I abandon my cautious pace and run toward the opening. It’s closing rapidly, but I think I can make it. I’m nearly there when a hand catches my wrist. I scream, struggling against my captor, but he holds me back and covers my mouth with his hand. Then he pulls me into the dark, still room, away from my escape.

TWENTY-THREE

I KICK HARD AGAINST THE MAN holding me in the dark repository, and he falls back with a groan, dropping his hold on me. Without missing a beat, I dash to where the rift has closed and tug frantically at the air, hoping to find a remnant of the studio. Meanwhile I hear my abductor racing in my direction.

I abandon my search and flee to a nearby shelf. It's hard to see in the dark, so I press against the shelf and creep along it. The man's footsteps slow to a walking pace. He's searching for me now. My only hope is the door to the repository. I could weave myself out of this moment and freeze the repository, but that won't protect Jost, and I have to get back to him.

Snaking from row to row, I stay close to the shelves, afraid to step too far out and reveal myself. At the last row, I spy the door. I wish I'd studied the map more closely so that I'd know where it led. This room is connected to the research labs somehow, so it's possible I could walk right into a room of scientists. My only hope is that they've gone home for the evening, but I can't count on that. And to get to the door, I'll have to move directly into the center aisle and make myself vulnerable to my attacker, who will definitely alert anyone in the area. It's a no-win situation, but waiting around will drive me crazy. So taking a deep breath, I bolt for the door.

I'm not fast enough. The man steps from the shadows at the end of the adjacent shelving unit and catches me around the waist. Clasping his hand over my mouth, he hisses into my ear: "Stop fighting me, Adelice."

I go limp in his arms, and he drops his hold. Whirling on him, I shove him hard in the chest. He stumbles, and I barely make out the annoyance flashing on his face in the dark.

"Remind me not to save your ass in the future," Erik says, regaining his footing.

"What are you doing here?" I demand in a low voice.

“Rescuing you,” he says, rubbing his chest.

“Who closed it?”

“What?” he asks, confused.

“The opening back to the upper studios,” I whisper.

“Is that how you got in here?” he asks, matching his volume to mine.

I nod, and begin moving back to the spot where I opened the rift. Erik follows behind me, but there’s nothing left of the gap. I have no idea what to do to save Jost, but every second I waste here leaves him in their clutches.

“So is this your big plan?” he asks.

“It was,” I say with a sigh. “But I guess it’s time to move on to Plan B.”

“Which is?”

“There is no Plan B yet,” I admit.

“What exactly was Plan A?” he asks.

“Get information,” I answer.

“That’s all?”

“Yes.”

He grimaces. “You need help with your plans.”

“But we have to get back. I left Jost on the other side.”

Erik stiffens as I say his name, and I’m reminded of the rigid distance the two boys usually keep from each other. “Well, it won’t take them long to figure out you’re here,” he says, tugging me back toward the repository’s door. “And you wasted a lot of time hiding from me.”

“You could’ve called out to me,” I say in an aggravated voice.

“I’m trying to keep a low profile.” Erik glares at me, anger burning through his eyes, but his swift pace shifts to a sprint. “Come on.”

“We’ve got to get to Loricel’s studio,” I tell him as we run.

“I know.” His hand is on my arm, urging me along.

At the door, he stops me and straightens a loose strand of hair. Looking at my feet he frowns. “Okay,” he says, “this is how we’re playing it. I found you in here, and I’m taking you to Cormac.”

“So I’m a prisoner?” I ask.

“Yes, so look scared.”

“That shouldn’t be hard,” I mutter.

Erik opens the door and grabs my arm roughly, forcing me through. I find myself in a brightly lit hallway. Up at the other end, two guards snap to attention and head our way.

“I caught her,” Erik calls to them. “I’m taking her to Cormac now.”

The older of the two men glances at his companion. Both of them must be ten years his senior at least.

“I have level-eighteen clearance,” he says, flashing a card from his hip pocket.

“Yes, sir,” both shout, but the eldest’s voice trips on “sir.”

I shift my eyes to the floor and drop my shoulders as Erik leads me away. Once we’re around the corner, he loosens his grip on me but doesn’t remove his hand.

“How did you find me?” I whisper.

“Cormac’s going crazy,” he says under his breath. “We’re on level-three alert.”

“But how did you know I was here?”

“When I escorted you on the goodwill tour,” he says, glancing back at me, “Cormac had you fitted with a tracking device—”

“No, he didn’t.” I remember Enora telling me how he wanted to insert a complant, but couldn’t.

“Yeah, he did,” Erik assures me. “They put it in your food. It’s programmed to lodge in your small intestine.”

My hand flies to my stomach, and I stare at him. “So they’ve been tracking my every move for weeks?” I ask.

“No,” Erik says, lowering his voice further. “I have. I corrupted their file. Only I have the tracking link now.”

“Then you …”

“Yes, I’ve been tracking you.”

“But you haven’t—”

“Turned you in?” he finishes for me. “We have similar … *allies*.”

The last word is so strained that I almost don’t believe him, except that he’s here now. Something clicks into place in my mind, something that tried to be discovered earlier today but it can’t be correct. I search his face for clues and settle on his blue eyes.

“Who?” I demand impatiently. The vague double-talk is beginning to wear on me, but I’m afraid to utter my suspicions.

“Now’s not the time,” he murmurs. “I hope you have a very good plan to get us out of here.”

“I told you I didn’t,” I snap.

“Then start thinking of one,” he says. “I’m sure you have more tricks up your sleeve, and I can only get us so far.”

I lapse into silence as Erik drags me through a set of white swinging doors. We’re back in the main hall of the Coventry, and my feet catch on the thick, shag carpets as he pulls me along. He leads me away from the meeting rooms, and we walk quickly toward the upper studio’s entrance. Several men in the coal-black uniform of the Guild are blocking the entrance, and as we draw closer, one holds up his hand to stop us.

“This area is quarantined, sir,” he states in a voice that’s all business.

“I know,” Erik says, pushing me forward. “Here’s why.”

“Um, I need to check with—”

“Cormac sent me for her,” Erik informs him, “but go ahead and call it in. He loves waiting.”

The guard’s eyes shift from him to me, and a chill ripples through my arms, raising goose bumps. It suddenly occurs to me that Erik might not be my friend; he might be leading me right into Cormac’s hands.

“Go on up, sir,” the guard says, stepping aside.

I keep quiet as Erik follows me up the stairs.

“Any ideas?” he mutters as we spiral through the tower.

I shake my head, and he moans behind me. If he is playing me, any plans I share with him could be turned against me. Not that I’ve thought of any.

When we reach the final twist in the staircase, Erik grabs my arm and drags me into Loricel’s studio. The walls are empty without the default image shimmering on them. I keep my eyes glued to the floor, but even without looking up, I see several sets of shoes around me: perfectly shined wingtips, red satin heels, and several pairs of thick boots. Between them, knees slump against the floor.

“Darling,” Cormac says in an irritated voice. “So nice of you to join us.”

I take a deep breath and lift my eyes. In the corner, Jost—fresh blood trickling from a cut near his left eye—is being held down by two burly

guards. Not far from him, Maela and Pryana are watching me with looks of triumph on their faces.

“Speechless!” Cormac proclaims, stepping into my line of sight and blocking my view of Jost. “Never thought I’d see the day. Guess we found her hot button.”

Erik’s grasp on my arm tightens, but I don’t react to Cormac’s taunts.

“I suppose this changes your ridiculous plan for her,” Maela sneers. No need to play nice if they’re going to kill me.

“We’ll proceed with the remap and go from there,” Cormac says in a quiet but firm voice.

“She’ll be a better wife then anyway,” Maela says, but while she looks pleased by this, Pryana’s eyes flash with anger. She must not have heard their whole plan until now. Can it be that she’s actually jealous?

Jost, who hasn’t moved since we entered the room, shifts against his captors and glares at them.

“Don’t like the sound of that, huh?” Maela says in a mocking tone.

“Shut up, Maela,” Cormac orders.

Her victorious smile fades, and she steps back toward the empty wall.

Cormac turns to Erik, who’s still holding me in place. “Where was she?”

“In the research area, sir,” he says.

I’d hoped he would rat me out and, at least, confirm my suspicion about him, but Erik’s answer leaves too much room for interpretation, and I still can’t be sure what side he’s on. I was in the research area, but why not tell them I was in the repository? Is he still buying me time?

“Enough of this,” Loricel says from across the room, and I turn to look at her. She keeps her gaze on Cormac and doesn’t meet my eyes.

“We need to find out what she was doing,” Cormac says, striding to the loom. “Pull up the corresponding piece of the weave.”

Loricel moves to the command panel and enters a code. The brilliant weave of the compound glides back onto the loom.

“Loricel was gracious enough to patch up the little hole you left,” Cormac tells me. “But I’d like you to show me exactly what you did and where you went.”

I shake my head, reeling from the sting of her betrayal. “Ask her,” I practically spit at them.

“Let me rephrase that,” Cormac says in a measured tone. “Do it or I’ll kill him right now, and then I’ll rip your precious sister.”

One of the guards removes a thick black club and presses a button on it, sending steel spikes shooting out from the top. He holds it over Jost. My eyes meet Jost’s, and he shakes his head slightly. But this isn’t about us anymore. We have to protect Amie and Sebrina.

The whole room must hear my heart racing now, but I speak slowly, careful to stay calm. “Fine,” I agree.

Erik drops his grip on my arm, and I walk to the loom. Running my fingers over it, I frown. “It’s not here,” I announce, turning past Loricel to speak to Cormac.

“What do you mean?” he asks. “Loricel, where is it?”

Loricel knits her eyebrows, and she leans in toward the loom. “I must have put it back in the wrong spot.”

Cormac pinches the bridge of his nose and squeezes his eyes shut. “This,” he says with a sigh, “is why I need you, Adelice.”

He mutters something that sounds a lot like “incompetence” under his breath and motions for Maela to join him. “Go com, Dr. Ellysen—”

“Ambassador, he’s already off-compound for the evening,” Pryana interrupts his order, standing at a companel. Maela glares over at her.

“Then,” Cormac snaps, “call him in and tell him to prep the remap. I’m not putting this off an hour longer. If she won’t do what’s best for Arras, then she doesn’t deserve the second chance.”

“Yes, sir,” Pryana says.

“Yes, let’s just finish this up and have her transplanted all at once. And, Pryana,” he adds, “tell him to prep for Adelice’s remap in the morning.”

I whirl toward him. “Who are you remapping tonight?” I demand.

“I’m going to miss your attitude,” he says.

Loricel clears her throat impatiently next to us. “I’m not worth your trouble.”

I stare at her. He can’t really mean to remap his only Creweler.

“Oh yes,” Loricel says with a nod. “Cormac thinks it’s worth his time to remap me.”

“I don’t have the time to explain the complex principles of remapping to you, you old fogey—”

“Look who’s talking,” she cries, straightening up. “At least I have some dignity.”

“Take her into custody,” Cormac commands, turning his back to her.

One of the guards drops his hold on Jost and moves toward Loricel, while the other drops the club and pulls Jost up into a choke hold.

“It’s too dangerous,” I remind Cormac, my voice breaking with desperation. “What will you do without her?”

“I’ll have you,” he says, unmoved.

“And if you lose me, are you willing to risk Arras to have your precious control?”

“We have time, and your sister will be ready before our raw materials run out,” he says, staring me down.

“She can’t weave,” I say, shaking my head. “She won’t be of any use to you.”

“If you already demonstrate the ability, she might have the recessive gene. Our scientists believe they can access the dormant gene and activate it.” He pauses to let this sink in. “I’ve done some checking up on her. She’ll be a suitable substitute in every duty Arras demands.” Cormac’s smile is mocking, twisting into something more wicked and heartless at his final threat than I’ve seen from him before.

It hits me like a blow to the stomach. Even if I comply with his wishes, Amie isn’t safe. I look to Jost, and his eyes meet mine. Even now—bent and broken—there’s strength in his gaze. He hasn’t given up, so I can’t either.

Maela saunters back toward the loom, and with a quick glance at Loricel, she smirks at me. She’s so close her over-applied perfume makes me gag.

“The doctor is coming, and Pryana is on her way to the clinic. And I’d be happy to take care of that problem for you,” she tells Cormac, tossing her head toward Jost.

My fist flies and makes hard contact with her jaw. My knuckles sing where they crack against bone. It hurts in a very satisfying way.

“This is why I told them you weren’t ready, little girl,” Maela screams, wiping the blood from her lip.

The words sizzle like spat venom. I can feel the hatred in them. I raise one eyebrow at her, and she glares in response, but Erik steps forward

and seizes her arm.

“Let me go,” she says, wrenching free from him. “You’re on her side.”

“I’m keeping you from making a mistake,” he warns her in a low voice.

“Sell it somewhere else, Erik. You think I don’t know that you’re helping her? At first I thought, *Let him bed her. It will take care of both our problems*. I was counting on you to ruin her,” Maela says, lurching toward him and grabbing him by the collar. Under her rage, her eyes reflect the wounds caused by his betrayal.

Detaching her fingers, Erik pushes her gently away. “Now’s not the time.”

Spinning back, she glowers at me over the loom. “You’re playing a dangerous game. Do you think you can save him and yourself? Your life is over, Adelice. You’ve proven you could never take over here. You don’t have the stomach,” she growls, “or the smarts.”

And then she laughs, and it’s like she’s injected me with some type of stimulant, because the weave of the room zooms into focus in front of my eyes, and I seize the strands of it with my left hand, rending it in two at my feet. The room splits down the middle, and Maela screams at the crack in the middle. It’s a terrifying sight: a black abyss broken by shimmering, interlocking light. This would panic most people. They might run. They might go pale and clutch against the wall as Maela has. To his credit, Cormac looks curious, but maintains his position. Silently. I will him to step forward, imagining myself pushing him down to an unknown fate, but he’s clever and he keeps his wits. And his life.

“I may be *dumb*—” I linger on the last word for Jost’s benefit, in an effort to catch his attention; maybe if he’s watching closely he can foresee my next play—“but let’s see you do that,” I chide her.

Maela lets out a low hissing noise, and I realize she’s stifling hysteria. For a moment, it appears I’ve driven her genuinely crazy, but Loricel steps in. She’s on the other side of the rift, and the guard has lost his grip on her in the chaos. I can see her eyes growing hard with determination. There is no amused sparkle or friendly warmth in them now. They are cold, set, green.

“Adelice, you have the power to stop this,” she reminds me.

“I know,” I murmur. “I just can’t think of a good reason to.”

“You know what will happen,” Loricel insists, gesturing to Jost. “Will you leave him here to die for you? What about your sister? What about me?”

I almost laugh until I realize she’s speaking in earnest.

“Let’s see. I can save a man who’s been revealed a traitor to the Guild. Why? So they can torture him for information? So they can keep him alive, but in agony, to try to keep me in line? You know, Loricel! You know what they’re capable of!” I’m shouting, and it sends a tremor down the open tear. Maela presses herself harder against the wall.

“Tsk, tsk, Maela. Who’s afraid of the bad little girl?” I gloat, making no effort to hide the mocking in my voice. One way or another, the charade between us ends tonight. Might as well get in a few good jabs while I can.

“I’m going to need you to loosen up on him a bit,” I order the guard holding Jost, stretching my hands as if to reach out and destroy more of the frail tapestry of the room.

He glares at me for a moment, and I meet his intent gaze, unblinking, until he drops his arms. It’s a surer sign of defeat than anyone else in the room has shown. I edge closer to Jost, but I don’t reach out for him.

Loricel is still thinking, and I know why. She also has the power to close the rift. This raises the question of why she hasn’t yet, and I have to assume she still hasn’t chosen a side.

“What do they have left to hold over you?” I ask her softly. “They’re going to kill you. Worse—they’re going to exploit your gift.”

She smirks in a mirthless, bitter way, curling her withering lower lip into a scowl. “They have nothing on me.”

“I know,” I say. “But do you?”

Her hard eyes flash with fire, for a moment losing their coldness. “You’ve put us in an impossible situation.”

“Not impossible,” I say lightly. “Just challenging. Nothing is impossible for a Creweler.”

“Except reality,” she reminds me.

“Except reality,” I echo. I’m not sure what she means, but I know it’s important.

And then it hits me. Reality is impossible for us to control because we work within Arras. Our talent lies in stretching and shifting. Outside of Arras, we're nothing. We only create illusion, and the sparkling, open void revealed before us is only another piece of that illusion. Beneath it lies something else, a reality only I can discover. A place where Cormac wouldn't dare follow me. Earth.

But I can't leave Jost. Or Loricel. Or my sister. Because the truth is that while I'm sure I can find my way out, I don't know if I can find my way back. All eyes are on me, waiting for a response.

"Enough of this," Cormac demands. "I've had enough of this drama. Adelice, like it or not, you're responsible for every life in Arras. Stop acting like a spoiled child and fix this." He's remarkably calm, but he stays firmly planted to his spot, a good distance away from the hole.

"That's just it," I say to him. "You treat us like children. But I know the truth."

"We don't need her anymore, Cormac," Maela calls out. "We'll have Loricel's skills transplanted, and there are those of us who'd make much better wives."

"Like you?" he asks scornfully.

She falls back at the harsh rebuke. Personally, I don't think even Maela deserves to put up with this much cruelty, but it's just what I need to get her where I want her.

"Maela," I say slowly, baiting the trap, "do you know how to do anything other than mutilate a piece of time?"

She glares at me, still standing firmly against the wall. Erik bristles next to her but stays silent. I need her to move if I'm going to kill two birds with one stone. Or at least knock them out.

"Remember that night in the courtyard when you caught me with Erik?" I taunt, but she stays still.

She stiffens at the recollection. I'm counting on her extreme mood swings to work in my favor for once.

"Oh c'mon. You can dish it out but you can't take it? You know, I never even gave him a moment's thought before that. He sought me out." I can see Erik's bright eyes traveling from Maela's face to mine. I try to keep my gaze directed at her now, because I know this revelation will be painful for Jost. But not as painful as the one I've just had. I know why

Erik is caught in the middle of this fight, and it's not because of me. The truth was always tugging at my mind, and I refused to see, but now it's so obvious I can't believe they don't all see it. The eyes should have been enough, but there were other clues. Both from a fishing village. The pained looks that crossed their faces when they saw each other. How they seem to hate each other.

"Well, I'm glad Erik kissed me," I say, planting my feet a bit firmer in my spot. "It gave me something to compare to Jost's kiss."

I risk a glance at Jost and Erik. Jost's puzzlement gives way to a look of betrayal, but Erik is watching me, trying to work out what I'm saying.

"I never realized until now how similar your eyes are," I tell them, and Erik's gaze widens a bit as he finally understands. "But it's that and the way you kiss that tells me you're brothers."

It hits the room like a bomb, ripping through the minds of everyone listening. Someday I'll tell Jost I had to do this to bait Maela and apologize, but there's no time now. Maela doesn't try to act calm. She flies at Erik for hiding the information. Considering her size, it might not have done much. Except I've left a gaping hole open in the middle of the room, and they tumble toward it. The stunned guard doesn't move, and I dare one brief look at Loricel. Her face says it all: she won't interfere.

Snapping to, I lunge toward Jost and grab his arm as Maela sends Erik over the edge of the tear. There's no sound as he falls, although I can see his mouth open. She teeters on the edge but doesn't fall. I've lost too many moments already, and each second counts. Thankfully, Jost is too weakened from the beating he took to protest as I throw us into the hole at our feet. I have enough time to see Loricel break away and move forward to begin the repair. She's fast, and I know she'll get it done before they can stop her, but she'll pay dearly. In the end, she gave me my choice.

The golden light sparkles and cracks around us, but I don't know if it's because the rift is closing or because we're falling too quickly through the raw weave between Arras and Earth. Jost has placed his arms protectively around my waist. If he's in pain, it's the least of his worries now. He must really trust me not to be screaming in my ear; or maybe despite our closeness he can't speak here. Tumbling forward, I latch on to

a strand and wrench us faster along the rough weave, moving closer and closer to Erik, who seems too far beyond our reach.

Theoretically, we could be falling forever, but I'm not exactly eager to test this. I can't leave Erik here alone though. He's twisted his head and caught sight of us. Catching on, he propels his body around so that he is falling backward, facing us, and watching my progress. And then something amazing happens. Maybe it's the rough, thick texture of this weave or maybe, like me, he can actually see the strands, because he reaches out and grabs at them until his hand catches one. He's still falling, but he's slowed his progress.

Jost throws his weight against me, pushing us to accelerate until he is able to reach out with his free hand and clasp it over the outstretched hand of his brother.

It would be a real moment if we weren't stuck in some void between worlds. At least I have a plan—thanks to Loricel. Well, an idea really, and I can only hope it works. Now that Jost and Erik are both safely within my control, I let go of the strand, and we slide faster along the mantle. As we hit the strands, sparks fly and bits fray. I can only imagine the damage we're doing. It's the kind of repair work they'll need a Creweler for. Maybe I'm buying Loricel some time, though I'm not sure that's doing her a favor.

Jost's hand stays closed over Erik's, and his arm is still tight against my waist. My hands are free so I reach into the strands and rip as hard as I can, wiggling my fingers under the coarse weave under Arras, and then my hands slip into something cool. Night air. The raw weave's strands are thick and tightly woven against one another and getting one hand through is exhausting, but there's a strange sense of accomplishment when I realize I've stopped our fall.

Of course, now we're floating in an extended void, so best not to get cocky. We are outside the reality of Arras and its physical laws, but honestly, I have no idea what to expect on the surface of Earth. If Loricel is right and there's nothing left, I'll have killed us all. I'm not sure I'm ready to face that possibility, but I like the idea of slowly wasting away as we fall through strands of time even less.

If Jost and Erik want to know what I'm doing, they don't ask. Even though I can't hear them here, I would be able to see their mouths

moving, but they remain tight-lipped. Right now they seem intent on letting me continue my manipulation of the strands and ignoring each other. Whatever brotherly love might exist between them, they aren't exactly giddy at their reunion. But there's no time for distractions. I push these concerns out of my mind and work harder at opening a new rift. Once it's big enough to stick an arm through it occurs to me that it might be smart to poke my head in and get a look at what I've gotten myself into. I don't want to drop us into the middle of an ocean after all.

I barely make out a cry of protest from one of the boys as I wiggle my head into the misplaced strands. It's dark. A large full moon casts a faint glow on shadowy objects all around me. I'm hanging above a street edged by a row of buildings. The light bounces off the black and in the distance it fades to twinkling gold. There's a stillness to the scene that makes it feel false. Another illusion. But as if to contradict me, a soft breeze brushes my face and tosses my hair. The scene remains relatively unchanged, but as my eyes adjust, I make out the wind tossing stray debris across the road. I hear the scrape of paper on concrete.

The good news is that we are not hovering over the middle of the ocean, but the bad news is that I have no idea where we are or what to expect of this world—Earth. It's more desolate than I imagined, which seems stupid, because I know there is no one left living on this layer. But there's shelter and, if we're lucky, maybe food. I suppose I thought others might have made their way out, but how could they without a Creweler?

Without me?

Regardless, it's the best option we have. I could try to open a rift and bring us back into Arras, but that would be even more dangerous. Loricel may have helped us escape, but she won't be in a position to help us if we return. I can't be sure she's even alive, and they'll be watching for our personal identifying sequences in the weave. No, it's not safe to return, so there's no other choice. Pulling back into the open weave, I work faster, more sure of myself now that I know we'll be safe when the entrance is large enough. I don't bother to look at either Jost or Erik. I'll have to deal with that drama later. Right now I have a job to do.

Time is coarser in the raw weave and my already scarred fingers soon begin to feel the work, despite the calloused tips Maela gave me. Having two other lives here depending on me, and desperately needing to get

through and figure out what to do about Sebrina and Amie, I ignore the ache in my hands. They're in danger every second we waste on the surface, and, unlike during the moments I wove within the Coventry, time will continue to move forward in both realities.

When I finally manage to carve out a wide enough gap, I nod dramatically to let my companions know we need to go through. I see Jost's mouth moving, and his eyes squint in concern. I shake my head to let him know I can't hear him and reach out with my free hand to suggest that he should enter. His mouth forms one word that's easy enough to read: no. Fine. Sooner or later he's going to want to come through. Of course, if I let go of him, he'll return to falling and probably never find this open space again. About the time I realize I'm chewing on the inside of my cheek, Erik impatiently struggles to the open spot. His left arm is still on my waist, and he pulls me along with him, like he's swimming in the air. When his free arm slips through the hole, he releases me and catapults himself forward, disappearing entirely. I turn back to Jost and raise my eyebrows. His arm tightens around me, and he frowns, but seems to realize that anything's better than being stuck in this interspace. Moving forward more slowly than his brother, he smoothly pulls me along until we are at the mouth of the opening. Looking at me for reassurance, he takes a deep breath and drags us both through. We land in a pile of crumbling concrete; it looks like the remains of a road. Apparently my hole wasn't exactly flush with the ground of the real world, but it's not so bad. We could have fallen much farther.

"I thought maybe you were dropping me off," Erik calls to us, his usually droll voice flat. He's already on the edge of the ruins, and he doesn't stop for us.

"Dare to dream," Jost grumbles back.

And there it is. The first words they've spoken as brothers in front of me. The exchange adds a chill to the frigid night air. Erik stalks forward until I only see his silhouette in the moonlight. We watch him make his way into the metro beyond us, and Jost puts his arm around me.

I shiver in his embrace, staring out at the abandoned remains of Earth. Here time seems to stand still, and yet all around me are signs of decay—the natural erosion of a place forsaken by men. We linger in a moment suspended on the verge of possibility and ruin. But before I can reach out

to break its mysterious hold, on the horizon a bloated mass appears, a ship in the air, flying low along the skyline, and from it, a sweeping light bursts forth, as though to welcome us back home.

END OF BOOK ONE

ALTERED

PROLOGUE

THEY ABANDONED EARTH. MEN LEFT THEIR HOMES and their shops. They deserted the streets to crack and scatter into the soil, renouncing dominion over the world and rejecting their own progress for the promise of the new and the next. And so Earth sits in splendid ruin.

On the horizon a metro rises in grotesque majesty, and behind us the ocean roars with life. Above us the sky twists and turns to watch us—an evolution of stars and light. I know little of this world, but hope gathers in my chest. This is our first chance. Maybe our only one.

Life.

Possibility.

Choice.

I'd been taught there was one reality: a reality guided and overseen and created by others. But standing on the edge of the past, I feel potential coursing through me. The natural strands of life are free here, glorious and unrestrained. Time slides around and wraps me in its protection. Anything can happen, and I feel the pulsing vitality of this truth in my arms and in my aching hands. Loricel was wrong about Earth and what it represents. She told me it was dead, a half-remembered relic of a different time, but this world isn't doomed.

It's waiting for me.

ONE

A SHIP'S BEACON SWEEPS OVERHEAD, BATHING US in light. My hand stretches out it as though to beckon the ship toward us, but I draw my hand back to shield my eyes, fear supplanting the brief thrill of knowing we are not alone on this planet. Fear the Guild has cultivated in me since they took me from my family. It is more powerful than the hope growing roots within me.

The hull of the ship is bloated and torpid, making its flight a reluctant crawl across the sky. It doesn't change course when it coasts over us, and although the brilliance of the watchlight fades past us, blood pounds through me, reminding me of one thing: even a world away from Arras, where no one has reason to harm me, I'm not safe. But I understand now what I couldn't before. My parents were wrong about me. They taught me to hide my gift.

But my hands are my salvation, not my curse.

I watch the ship ride low along the skyline, skimming across the glittering night sky. If it stays on its current trajectory, it will collide with the mountain range nestled against the metro I spy on the horizon.

"Did it see us?" Jost whispers as though the pilot might be able to hear us. His usually bright blue eyes are dark, nearly matching his curly, shoulder-length hair, and I can see the fear in them.

"It couldn't have. Where's it going?"

Jost squints in concentration and he cocks his head, trying to see it more clearly. "I think it's on patrol."

Then it hits me. The ship isn't soaring birdlike, it's hanging from a patchwork of rough strands like a puppet dangling from a master's strings. The sky is *wrong*. I thought it was stars sparkling overhead, like the ones that peppered the evening sky in Arras. But these stars are long, and they seem to fade into a tangle of light that twinkles erratically over us. I stare for a long moment while the truth sinks in. These aren't stars nestled into a night sky.

They're *strands*.

It’s the same strange, raw weave that we came through when I ripped us out. Loricel, the Creweler who trained me and the most powerful woman in Arras, showed it to me in her studio, explaining that it was a buffer between Arras and another world. She revealed the truth to me that day: that Arras was built on the ruins of Earth.

“It has to be the Guild,” I say. I already knew the Guild had a presence on Earth. If I had stayed in Arras, it would have become my job to help them drill for elements here. Of course they would have security forces guarding the buffer between the worlds. The hope building in my chest evaporates, giving way to complete panic. I spot Erik to my left. He’s too far away from us for me to protect him, but I can’t sit by and do nothing, and before I can plan my next move, the watchlight washes over us again. I respond instinctively; my left hand lashes out and rends the air around us, looking for something to latch onto and warp into a shield of protection. There is no delicate, precisely knit weave on this planet. It’s not constructed like Arras, which means I’m useless here.

And yet, I can feel the strands of Earth. They snake against my skin, and if I could calm my racing heart, I think I could even hear them because the space around me crackles with vitality. These aren’t the uniform strands of Arras, but they’re composed of the same material. They’re loosely connected and flexible. Their vibrancy shivers across my damaged fingertips, the threads more alive than any I felt in Arras. There the weave pricked dully at my touch after my hands were scarred during Maela’s torture session. But these threads aren’t neatly woven into a pattern and they are full of unexpected life. During my time at the Coventry, I could warp time strands into a separate moment, protecting Jost’s and my conversations and giving us time alone. Those moments were easy to construct because of the uniformity of the Coventry’s weave. However, the Earth strand doesn’t warp into the bubble of protection I expect. Instead the thick, golden strand coils into my fingers, pulling farther and farther into the sky until it snags across the hull. The ship groans loudly, changing from tarnished steel to bloody rust, bits flaking and falling off. It crumbles more with each second until it plummets to the surface in a flood of sparks and debris.

Jost yanks me along as he runs toward the metro that lies miles away, farther under the hood of the strange raw weave of Arras. The other

direction would take us toward the ocean and there will be nowhere to hide there. I stumble behind him, tripping against rocks in our path. Fragments of the wreckage drift by us as we run. The small sparkles of fiery debris are lovely against the black air but the clattering maelstrom behind us scrapes at my ears, and I reach up to cover them. I can't attach what's happened to me. How could I have done *that*?

"In here!" Erik's cry stops our flight toward the metro. He waits against the rotting door frame of a shack that blends like a smudge into the shadowed landscape. The shack isn't sturdy or large enough to have been a home. It's hard to tell what purpose it once served—one lone building isolated miles from any other, withering and forgotten.

"You probably shouldn't lean on that," I point out as I near him.

He knocks the wooden frame with his fist and some dust sprinkles down as I duck inside the shack. "It's sound enough."

I think that is supposed to reassure me.

Erik steps outside. He's keeping watch, waiting, like me, to see what will happen now. The downing of the ship won't go unnoticed.

The air is heavy here. The chill of it and the lack of light, remind me of the cell I was kept in at the Coventry—and of the cells I visited only hours ago with Jost before we made our escape. It feels like years have passed already.

Someone flips on a handlight and I wonder what treasures we've brought from Arras in our pockets. I'm suddenly aware of weight in my own—the digifile. It will be useless here, I realize.

The battered structure and the somber darkness outside remind me how lost I am, and so I wait for something to change. Something to indicate I haven't made a terrible mistake, but not even a breeze disturbs us here. We can't hide for long now that I've attacked the ship. The Guild will find us whether we stay here or head back toward the metro. I can almost see the gloating look that will be on Cormac's too-perfect face when his officers catch us. By then they will have patched up the hole I ripped in the Coventry's weave to get to Earth. He won't waste any time sending me to be altered once he has me back. It will be straight to the clinic for me, to be made into an obedient Creweler and wife. Dread locks me to the spot, and I wait for the Guild to come and drag me away again. Erik, Jost, and I sit in silence for a long time before I start to relax.

We’re hidden for now. Sheltered and safe, but most important, no one has come after us yet.

I want to go outside and search for the ship—to see what I’ve done. I want to study the strange raw weave that floats above us here. Instead I scrape through a layer of dust on the window to peek out. Jost stands beside me and brushes ash from my hair. He frowns, examining one of my arms. I look down. Small burns speckle my pale skin, some have even blistered. I’d been too terrified to feel it.

“Does it hurt?” Jost asks.

I shake my head and a bobby pin tumbles to the floor.

“Here,” he says, reaching behind me. He tugs at the remaining pins until my hair swirls down across my shoulders in a cascade of scarlet. I shake it, trying to get any remaining debris out.

“Better?” I ask. We’re so close that my green eyes reflect back from his blue ones.

Jost swallows, but we’re interrupted before he can respond.

“What happened back there?” Erik demands.

“I caught the ship, but—”

“Nothing,” Jost cuts me off. “It was an accident.”

“Looked more like suicide to me. They’ll know exactly where we are now,” Erik says, taking a step toward his brother.

“What if it was looking for us?” I ask, balling my fists. “At least I bought us some time.”

“You destroyed it,” Erik says in a soft voice. Our eyes meet and I turn away. It was an accident, and he knows that. He isn’t accusing me of doing it *on purpose*. No, the accusation in his words is far more cutting. He’s accusing me of not being in control.

He’s right.

“I want to go check things out,” I say.

“We should wait until morning,” Jost suggests.

I take a slow, steadying breath. “I don’t think morning is coming.”

“They don’t have daylight here?” he asks.

“No.” Erik steps in. “Didn’t you see the sky? They don’t have a sun. It’s that weave we fell through when she ripped us from Arras.”

So Erik noticed the raw weave suspended above Earth, too. But how much did he notice? Did he see the ship was attached to the sky?

“I want to get a better look at it,” I say, and start toward the door.

“If there are any survivors on that ship, they could be out there,” Jost argues.

The splitting hull flashes through my mind and the memory of ripping metal scratches in my ears. No one could live through that.

“There are no survivors,” I say.

“She’s right,” Erik says. It’s not a friendly agreement, but it isn’t hostile. He’s cool and distant.

“I won’t be long,” I assure Jost.

“Do you think you’re going alone?” he asks.

“I can take care of myself. I’m not some helpless girl.”

“She’s right again,” Erik calls from the dark recess he’s crouched in. “Look what she’s gotten us into.”

I bite my lip. *That* was hostile. Definitely not his usual friendly banter.

“I know that,” Jost says loudly. “But none of us should be wandering around on our own.”

I study his face for a moment, wondering if he would be so eager to escort his brother to check out the landscape. I decide not to ask.

But Jost continues. “Of course you’re welcome to wander off anytime.”

I guess that answers that.

“Clearly the fact that we are in some type of forsaken alternate reality is much less important than your grudge against me, so can we get this over with and move on?” Erik asks. He moves out of the shadows to face his brother. Standing there, they mirror each other, and for the first time I study them as brothers. I’d only just figured out the real reason they were cold to each other at the Coventry: they were both hiding that secret. They’re exactly the same height, something I’d not noticed before, but Jost is bulkier from his work at the Coventry. He’s dressed in casual work clothes, unlike Erik, whose suit, while wrinkly, is still smart. Erik’s hair brushes his shoulders and Jost’s is longer, but although they share the same unruly waves, Erik’s silvery hair is smoothly slicked into place. Jost’s wild dark locks look like you’d expect after as much action as we’ve seen. The one thing that’s exactly the same is their piercing blue eyes.

“Grudge?” Jost laughs, but there’s a hollowness to it. “You think watching my wife, our sister, *our mother* get wiped from Arras resulted in a grudge?”

“Then why are you here? What purpose does it serve to run to the Guild if you hate them so much for what they did to Rozenn?” Erik demands.

“That’s our problem.” Jost steps closer to him. “You’ve never understood. Even I knew why Rozenn’s brother and his friends were discontent. I know what the Guild is capable of, and so do you. How can you turn a blind eye? You’ve become one of them.”

“Jost, you were at the Coventry for two years, and I never once let it slip you were from Saxun.”

“It would have given away your own secret. You wouldn’t want those officials knowing you were a fisherman’s son,” Jost accuses.

Erik’s jaw tightens. “I never once gave them a reason to suspect your motives, but I’ll be honest with you, I don’t understand what you were waiting for. I expected you to attack them, maybe even kill the Spinster who did it. Anything,” Erik says. “I wouldn’t have blamed you. I stood back, and you did nothing. I actually thought maybe you’d formed some type of twisted dependency on them.”

“That’s not it.” Jost sighs, and the lightest of lines remain on his forehead and around his eyes. “If you understood then you’d know I wasn’t looking for some quick, simple payback. I want to understand how the system operates.”

“How will that help you heal?” Erik demands. “What can you possibly gain?”

“*Myself*? Not much. But understanding the system and getting the information into the right hands could do more damage.”

“So that’s it,” Erik says in a quiet voice. “You were plotting treason.”

“And killing Spinsters wouldn’t have been that?” Jost asks, responding to the allegation in his brother’s voice.

“Killing the one responsible would be reasonable,” Erik says. “But destroying the system would undermine the peace the Guild has established.”

“Peace?” Jost echoes with a laugh.

I think of the people who have been ripped, the neatly organized proof in storage at the Coventry, the look of defeat on my father's face as he tried to shove me into the tunnel the night the Guild came to claim me. No part of me wants to laugh.

Jost grabs my arm. "Ask Adelice. Ask her what it's like to rip someone from Arras. Ask *her* if it's peaceful for them."

I open my mouth to protest being dragged into the middle of this, but Jost doesn't wait for me to respond to his point.

"Or better yet, ask me, Erik. Ask me what it was like to see it happen." Jost's voice drops down and trails off. None of us speak. "I watched it. I saw her slip away piece by piece. I watched as they took her away from me."

"I'm sorry," Erik offers. He sounds sincere, but even I know his words are far from enough.

Jost shakes his head slightly as if to clear his thoughts, and looks out into the dark. "Rozenn was better than any of us. You or me. So was our mother." He pauses. "And my daughter."

Erik's shock registers like a slap across the face. "Daughter?" he mouths. No actual sound comes, but the heaviness of the word presses on my chest, and judging from their expressions, they feel it, too.

"You missed out on a lot when you took off." Jost's words are dismissive, but he doesn't look away from Erik.

"You could have telebounded me," Erik insists. Now he's the one who sounds accusatory.

"And what?" Jost asks. "You would have come to visit? You didn't come when Dad got sick or I got married. I knew where we stood with you when you left to serve the Guild. Your family couldn't help you move forward politically, so we were of no use to you.

"You wouldn't have cared," Jost continues. "You were busy cozying up to Maela, following her orders like the perfect Spinster's errand boy. Just like you've been busy weaseling your way into Adelice's heart."

I should put a stop to these accusations before they kill each other, but part of me wants to see how Erik reacts. I know how Erik feels about Maela, the power-hungry Spinster he worked for at the Coventry. Erik and I both counted her as an enemy. Jost's charge sends a thrill through

me, because deep down I always suspected Erik's reasons for getting close to me were about more than friendship.

"But that backfired when Ad brought you here. All that work you did to get to the top is gone. You'll never convince them that you're loyal again. You're through with the Guild," Jost says.

Erik's face contorts into a mask of rage. "You barely know me or why I came to the Coventry, but don't let that stop you from making unfair accusations. It's rather entertaining, and it doesn't look like there's much else to do around here," he spits back.

"There *is* a lot to do around here and fighting isn't on the list," I intercede, before things get more out of control. "Save your personal problems for later, we have work to do."

"What do you have in mind? Rebuild the city?" Erik asks. "Or should we skip to the repopulating part?"

"Shut up," Jost commands. "You aren't funny."

"Why? That's the nice part of getting stuck on a completely forsaken piece of dirt."

"You better hope that you find someone to help you do it then, because she's taken. I'm sure there's a nice dog around here somewhere. Maybe you should stick to your own species," Jost says.

I'm between them before Erik releases his fist, and I barely cringe when I see it moving toward my face.

Jost catches Erik's fist, and Erik freezes. But his surprise at my near-disastrous intervention is quickly replaced by a glare, leveled directly at his brother.

"We're going to check things out," Jost says through gritted teeth.

"Suit yourself," Erik says. "I certainly don't need you here, moping about the joint."

Jost grabs my arm, a bit more roughly than usual, and drags me from the shack. I pull out of his grasp, my hand flying to rub my throbbing skin.

"That hurt," I inform him.

He stares at me for a moment and then his eyes soften. "I'm sorry. I wasn't thinking. Erik just—"

"I know," I say quietly, "but I'm not Erik. Don't take it out on me."

He nods his apology and I take his hand to let him know we can drop it. We have more important things to worry about right now.

The metro is still several miles away if I can trust my generally poor sense of direction. The ocean now lies far enough behind us that although I can make out its glassy surface, I no longer hear the beat of its waves. We stand between this world and the one we left. Between the danger that lies ahead of us in the metro and the abyss behind us, that will swallow us whole. Every choice we make now will have a consequence I can't foresee, because I don't understand this world yet.

The quick crunch of approaching footsteps makes it seem as if someone has made a choice for us. We've been caught. A handlight blinds us to our approaching captor.

"Who's there?" Jost calls. He pushes me behind him, but I step back out. He doesn't try again.

"I should be asking you that." The voice is rough, but feminine. The light fades away, and I blink against spots of phosphorescence left in my vision. A girl blurs into view. She wears no cosmetics, but is still quite beautiful. Not in a Spinster way though. Her features are angular, sharp and chiseled, and her dark hair cascades down her back. There is nothing artificial or stylized about her. Her clothes are practical—leather pants that lace up the side, a belt slung low on her hips, and a thick silk tunic. This is a girl who doesn't belong in Arras.

"We saw the ship go down. We came out to see what happened," I lie, hoping against everything I've been led to believe about Earth that the metro ahead of us is populated.

"And you had nothing to do with bringing the ship down from the Interface?" She gestures up to the raw weave that covers the sky.

The girl's eyes sweep over us. Jost might pass her inspection. His clothes are as utilitarian as hers, but there's no denying that I look out of place in comparison, in my lavender suit, stockings, and pumps. Nothing about me, down to the emeralds clipped to my ears, correlates to what I've seen of Earth.

"Let me see your necks," she says.

"Why?" I ask.

"Credentials."

I hesitate for a moment but then acquiesce. I don’t know what she’s looking for, but I know she’s not going to find it. I pull my hair up, Jost does the same, and when we turn back around to face her, a rifle is leveled at us.

She utters one word: “Fail.”

Time seems to slow as her finger presses against the trigger, and I scream, “Wait!” It surprises even me, and the girl takes a step back. She’s checking for a mark, and I have one—a techprint burned into my wrist by my father, who was hoping I would escape the retrieval squad.

Shoving my sleeve up, I thrust my arm out to her and point to the pale hourglass imprinted on my skin like a scar.

The rifle slips in her hand, the barrel now pointing at the ground.

“Your left hand?” she whispers.

“Yes.”

She’s shocked, but as quickly as the rifle appeared, it disappears across her back. She pushes my sleeve down to cover the techprint.

“Go to the Icebox,” she says, “and lay low. We’ll find you. You aren’t safe here.”

“What’s the Icebox?” Jost demands.

“The Icebox is the city ahead of you,” she says. “It’s Sunrunner territory and outside Guild control.”

“Where are we?” I ask.

“The remains of the state of California,” she says. “The Icebox is the only inhabited city in this territory. You’ll be safe from the Guild there—for now. Stay put and stay hidden. Don’t go out after hours and don’t let anyone see that techprint.”

“Sure,” I mutter, and the girl’s hand seizes my arm.

“Your life depends on it,” she says.

I nod to show that I understand, even though none of this makes sense. What does my father’s techprint have to do with Earth? What’s a Sunrunner? But I know she’s right about one thing: the Guild is coming for me, and we aren’t safe here.

She strides away without giving us her name. Her warning hangs in the air. I don’t watch her, even though she’s not headed to the metro but back toward the ocean.

“Why would she care about your techprint?” Jost asks, but I ignore him as we start to jog back to where we left Erik. We need to get out of here, and if there are people in this Icebox, we can blend in and hide until I figure out how my techprint is linked to this girl.

Nothing tied to the night of my retrieval can be ignored, especially when that thing is a mark left before my father showed me that he and my mother were more than dissenters.

They were traitors—like me.

TWO

THE SCENTS OF THE METRO MINGLE, PERFUMING it with the aromas of sewage, baking bread, rotting fruit, and the sweat of its bustling inhabitants. It is pleasant one moment and stomach-turning the next. We've been here for a week, but it doesn't feel like home and no one's come looking for us yet.

But bit by bit I'm growing more accustomed to the strange world I've found myself in. We stumbled into the Icebox not knowing what to expect, and found people, shops, and solar-powered lights. Erik discovered quickly that the small items we had on us could be pawned for currency, which bought us access to a cheap hotel room. Today Erik and Jost let me come with them to the grey market, the seedy part of the metro, where illicit trade takes place, on the condition that I don't speak to anyone. I agreed but only to get out of the rat trap masquerading as a hotel I've been stuck in during their other trips, trips that produced stale food and little else. But I'm not looking for a meal, I want information. Erik has learned a lot on his trips to the market, and we're starting to understand how things work here. But we still haven't found the mysterious girl who sent us to the Icebox.

The Icebox is a conglomeration of buildings from before the war and ones constructed by the syndicate that runs the entire metro—the Sunrunners, the powerful group that controls the Icebox by monopolizing solar trade. Our hotel's manager patiently explained the lighting systems to us our first night. He does a fair business off new refugees coming into the Icebox, and he assures us the Sunrunners are not friends of the Guild. Apparently, Sunrunners keep control of solar energy because they are the only ones brave enough to venture outside the borders of the Interface, where the Guild mining zones begin. I think I saw a Sunrunner out on patrol one day, but so far we've steered clear of them. Even if we share a mutual enemy, it doesn't mean the Sunrunners are looking for allies.

There are rules here—rules reinforced by large, threatening posters pasted to poles and buildings. As we pass through the streets, moving

toward the grey market, the notices warn us:

SOLAR HOURS FROM

8 RESOLVED DAYLIGHT HOURS

TO

7 RESOLVED DAYLIGHT HOURS

PATROLS CEASE AT

7:15 RESOLVED DAYLIGHT HOURS

HEAVY CURTAINS, SALLY PORTS, AND REINFORCED

FRAMING REQUIRED FOR ALL SHELTERS AND

PLACES OF BUSINESS

The posters disappear as the road narrows, the pavement cracks and shatters, and the street-side food stalls are replaced with dimly lit storefronts—the kind that don't have signs. We're nearing the grey market. The rules aren't enforced here, but it's as strictly controlled by the Sunrunners as the rest of the Icebox.

We pass a man begging on the sidewalk with a sign that reads: REFUGEE. NO FAMILY. PLEASE HELP. Jost navigates me around him before I can react.

There are refugees every few feet in the main blocks of the Icebox. I haven't gotten used to seeing them yet. Even the poor in Arras had meager rations. I want to stop and ask these people what they were running from that was worse than being cold and hungry on the street.

But I already know the answer.

The thing that bothers me is that I can't help them—and Jost and Erik won't even let me try.

Erik is ahead of us, not bothering to slow his pace, but a block later he stops and turns to face us. "Look, I've got a good thing going with this

guy. But he’s a bit paranoid. He’s already commented on my Guild paraphernalia, so—”

“You want us to stay outside,” I finish for him. Most of our funds thus far have come from pawning the watches, tech, and even some of the clothes we had on us when we escaped from Arras, but I’m still clinging to my digifile, although it’s run out of power. I pull it from my pocket and offer it to him. “Here, take this. It’s probably worth something.”

“No,” Erik says quickly. “We should hold on to it.”

“Why? It doesn’t work down here,” I say as I slide it back into my pocket.

“You never know. Besides, we wouldn’t want to pawn that without wiping its memory,” he explains.

“Okay. Are you sure you don’t want us to tag along?” I ask.

“I don’t want the guy to feel overwhelmed,” he says, sounding apologetic.

I ignore the sorry tone. It’s growing thin: both boys avoiding each other, speaking through me, Jost’s anger, and Erik’s shame. I thought it had come to a head when I ripped us from Arras, choosing to take both of them with me, but the argument that ensued revealed how large a rift exists between the brothers. Erik’s shock at learning Jost has a daughter hasn’t dissipated yet.

But none of this is getting us anywhere, and separating the two of them might be the opportunity I need to finally get a real conversation going with Jost. He clams up in Erik’s presence. We need a plan. We can’t tread water forever, waiting for the girl to find us.

“Maybe Jost and I can duck into the fine-looking establishment back there.” I hitch my thumb toward the bar we’ve passed. I want to keep the mood light so he knows it’s okay to go.

Beside me Jost takes a step back. It’s good to know I still have the ability to surprise him—or maybe *horrify* is the right word. Erik shakes his head, but for a moment his grim demeanor slips and he nearly smiles. He leans over, grabs my shoulder, and whispers, “Keep your eyes open. This is not a *nice* place.”

As though the claustrophobic, anonymous corridor we’re in didn’t give that away.

“You should smile more,” I whisper back. “Or you’ll lose your reputation.”

“My reputation?”

“As a charmer.”

This does make him smile, and the icy anger in my chest thaws a little at the sight. “I can be anything I want here, Ad. Perhaps I’ll be serious.”

“It doesn’t suit you,” I warn him.

Jost’s arm circles around my shoulder, interrupting Erik’s and my repartee, and indicating he’s ready to go.

Or rather, he’s ready to take me away. From Erik.

Erik stiffens a bit, stepping back from me. “Promise me you’ll stay with him.”

“I’ll stay close,” Jost tells Erik. This is the most they’ve communicated since their argument on the day we arrived here.

“*We’ll* stay close,” I add.

“No, explore.” Erik waves us off. “There’s not much time before curfew.”

“So we shouldn’t get separated,” I say.

“I can find my way back to the hotel if it takes too long. You two have … fun.”

That’s the last thing we’ll be having.

“Do you want to find something to eat?” Jost asks as we circle back in the direction we came from, leaving Erik to his business.

I raise an eyebrow, as though challenging him to make that happen. If he can find a place with food—the kind that might be safe to *actually* eat—around here, I’ll be impressed.

“Fair enough,” he says.

“Let’s walk,” I offer. “Talk. See what’s around.”

Jost agrees, but the conversation never gets going. Instead he is silent and seems lost in another place and time. He’s been this way since I told him about his daughter, Sebrina. I’d discovered she hadn’t been killed along with the rest of Jost’s family. She is alive, her information, which reveals exactly where she is in Arras, tucked safely in storage at the Western Coventry. Now we have to figure out a way to get to her, but it isn’t possible as long as we’re stuck on Earth.

In a way I understand what he’s going through. My own sister, Amie, is still in Arras, and she is in more danger than ever before. Jost and I both feel the pressing desperation of each moment that has passed since we left our loved ones to the devices of the Guild, especially now that we’ve chosen treason instead of continuing to be complicit in the Guild’s great deception. I couldn’t resign myself to accepting the reality they create on their looms, not when I knew how they misused their power, and not after learning of the existence of Earth. But now that we’re actually on Earth, it’s becoming increasingly obvious that I can’t count on either Jost or Erik to help me figure out what to do next.

I brush back the tangle of dark curls that has fallen over Jost’s cheek, but he doesn’t seem to notice, except to take my hand in his. The movement is automatic, but I hold his hand anyway.

We hang a left, leaving the narrow alley and heading into a row of shops. The street lamps cast shadows against the stone, and I move closer to Jost. Even after a week here, I haven’t gotten used to the perpetual darkness covering the metro. The sun that never rises. The strange twists of light that flicker and spark across the sky—the Interface. I can see it now, lingering overhead. The strands might twist and sparkle, implying movement, but the Interface is always there—a permanent buffer between Earth and Arras. It blocks the sun and separates the worlds. It’s the boundary between the world we’ve left behind and the one we’ve discovered.

Some of the stores in the grey market are boarded up, others crumble toward the sidewalk, but lights burn faintly in a few. I have no interest in going inside any of them. I’m eager to explore the shops in the heart of the Icebox, not these back-alley establishments on the metro’s outskirts. I want to visit the stores with real customers. I want to know more about Earth, but right now we have so little money we stay away. I’m not sure what we’re waiting for though, since we’re not getting any answers in the grey market.

These streets are deserted. A few hulking, old-fashioned motos chug along the streets near the main marketplace, but not here. The pedestrians we spot keep their heads low, ducking into shops, and not making eye contact with us when we pass by them. Despite the constant darkness, my body tells me evening is near. Actually the airy rumble of my stomach

does. Business transactions begin in huddles on street corners, and more and more customers trickle into the grey market to conduct their affairs after hours despite the curfew imposed throughout the Icebox. They don't seem concerned about the rumors of snatchers roaming the streets after the lamps go out. In the nicer sections of the Icebox, food stalls are packed up and people rush their children indoors promptly at 7:00. Not here though.

The solar lamps are already growing dim. In less than an hour, they'll be extinguished completely. On a corner, a young man inspects one of the lamps. His bag lies open, revealing a variety of wrenches and screwdrivers, but his clothing doesn't suggest he's a laborer. His pants are well cut, and his long coat is leather, which seems like a luxury given the absence of animals I've noted in the Icebox. He's not a simple worker. He must be a Sunrunner.

"Will Erik be able to find us?" I ask Jost. He drops my hand at the mention of his brother's name, but stays close to me.

"We're only a street away. Trust me, Erik can take care of himself," Jost replies.

"Look, I understand—"

"No, you don't." He stops me. "You trust him. I don't. He'll take off the first chance he gets."

"And where will he go?" I ask. It's a logical question, so I'm not likely to get a straight response.

"You don't know him like I do," he says, giving me an answer as crooked as they come.

"Maybe not." I stop and face him, planning to remind him that a lot has changed in the last two years. Erik may have left Saxun to pursue a political career, turning his back on his family and friends, but it was Erik who helped me the night Jost and I were discovered sneaking around the Coventry. I've been preparing my give-him-a-chance-before-I-stab-you-both lecture for the past few days. But something I see over his shoulder stops me.

A woman. She's short, tottering in heels down the street. I catch glimpses of her face in the flicker of dying lamplight. The slope of her eyes. Her diminutive, slender form. The thick, straight hair swaying around her shoulders.

“Valery,” I breathe.

“What?” Jost asks, confused by the change in conversation.

“It’s Valery,” I say, grabbing his arm to turn his attention to the other side of the street. The woman has passed before he can catch more than her fading shape. She’s moving quickly and with purpose.

“Valery is dead,” Jost reminds me in a gentle voice.

I know that. At least, she should be dead. A victim of retribution for the suicide of Enora, my mentor at the Coventry and Valery’s lover. Loricel told me Valery had been ripped the night Loricel warned me of Cormac’s plans to remap me, and yet I’m positive of what I’ve seen. “It’s her.”

I don’t wait for him to argue with me. Valery is growing smaller in my vision, her figure blurring with each step she takes away from us, and I follow her. I don’t run. That seems a sure way to draw unwanted attention to yourself in a place like the grey market, but I move quickly enough that I keep her in my sight until she turns a corner.

Skidding around the building she disappeared past, I realize I’m on the edge of the grey market. The buildings stretching before me are better maintained. Most have signs, and many are already closed. But Valery is nowhere in sight, which means she’s gone into one that’s still open. Doors are locked, lights turned off, and then I stumble upon a door that creaks open when I touch it. The lights are on in the store, revealing a cluttered room, full of books and knick-knacks strewn in piles along the floor, and filling tables. It will be a miracle if I can even walk around. But someone could hide here. I have no reason to suspect Valery saw me, but if she did, I wouldn’t blame her for wanting to avoid me.

That doesn’t mean I am going to let her.

THREE

I GLANCE AT THE SIGN HANGING ON a post by the door: THE OLD CURIOSITY SHOP. Curious indeed. After a few moments navigating the store, I see no signs of life, but what I do find holds my attention: relics from a forgotten world, particularly an old radio. I forget my quest and stare at it, tentatively reaching out to touch its buttons, but it's as dead as the one hidden in the secret cubby in my parents' home. A product of yesterday, and nothing more.

I'll have lost Valery completely by now, if it was even her at all, so I linger in the store and riffle through the books, knocking years of dust off them. A copy of Shakespeare's sonnets catches my eye. I read it over and over as a child, stealing it from the stash of contraband in my parents' room. We had a few books, and if my parents minded my reading them, they certainly never said anything. I understand now how precious they were, and more than anything I want to take this volume with me. I couldn't protect those books. I couldn't protect my parents, but I can have a piece of them again.

"Not many young people are interested in books these days," a raspy voice says. A face, lined and gaunt, follows the words, appearing in the doorway. The woman limps over, resting against a cane and I notice that one of her feet is made of steel and wood.

"My parents had it," I tell her. "I read it as a child."

"Quite the luxury," she says. "Books *and* having the time to teach your child to read."

I pause, not sure how to respond. This conversation is heading in a dangerous direction. Many of the Icebox's inhabitants are refugees, but that doesn't make it any safer to admit I am one myself.

"Keep it," she offers.

"I couldn't," I say. "Not without paying."

The shop owner seems to grow an inch at the mention of payment. She can't do much business selling radios that don't work and books that

can’t be read.

“I don’t have any money though,” I admit.

“Well,” she mutters, shaking her head, “at least you can read.”

“I have this,” I say, unlatching an earring. I only offer her one, because I know the emeralds in the pair are real and because I know the boys will be furious if I come back missing both. We’ve been hawking our possessions strategically and we’ve been saving the earrings until we have a plan for getting back to Arras and need real money.

“You’re either proud or an idiot,” she says, but she accepts the earring. “Look around, take some more of this junk off my hands. An emerald for a book isn’t a fair trade, child.”

I pocket the sonnets and consider asking for the radio, but purely out of nostalgia. It will do us no good, and I’ll be forced to abandon it as soon as we are on the move again. Instead I trail my fingers along the dusty spines of books. The books my parents kept were full of stories and poetry, but many of the books on these shelves recall the history of Earth. It’s the information I’ve been seeking. This woman has been collecting it for me, safeguarding the information against the entropy that envelops so much of this world. I wonder how many generations of owners stacked these shelves and traded the past before her.

The tinkle of a bell interrupts my thoughts, and I turn quickly to the door to see who has entered. In my haste, I knock a few books off the shelf, but the old woman has vanished into the recesses of the shop, so I retrieve them quickly before she notices. Jost appears at my side, looking decidedly displeased.

“What was that about?” he demands, not bothering to bend down and help me.

“Valery. I couldn’t let her disappear,” I say, stacking the books neatly. “But I lost her, and this was the only shop open—”

He stops me. “Your earring.” My hand flies to my naked earlobe, but it’s too late to cover it up.

“I traded it,” I admit in a low voice, but inwardly I gather up strength and stand to face him.

“For what?” he says. His voice is soft, but it isn’t kind.

“A book,” I say. “More than one actually. Who knows what we might find out.”

Jost grabs the books and slams them down on the shelf, and as he does he knocks a stack of papers to the floor. “Have some respect,” I hiss as I snatch the brittle pages, but they aren’t just paper. They’re *Bulletins* full of old news.

He starts in on *respect* and *scaring him to death* and *throwing away resources*, but I only hear snatches of what he says because I’m reading the headline neatly printed in block letters on faded, yellow paper:

Hope Against Tyranny:
Science Offers an End to War

> May 1, 1943—Preliminary studies termed the Cypress Project indicate the end of World War II is in sight. According to sources within the project, investors visited the laboratories for a presentation on the viability of the looms, which have been funded by twelve allied nations in cooperation with generous contributions from individuals in the private sector. The visit was necessary to secure permission to proceed to human trials of the project.
>
> The war departments of all twelve nations involved with the Cypress Project have issued a call for healthy young women between the ages of sixteen and thirty years to serve as test pilots on the looms. For the first time in American history, chosen women will be considered as enlisted troops in the U.S. Army.

But it’s the photograph that I can’t process: a scientist demonstrating on a loom for a group of men who wear ties and horn-rimmed glasses. Hardly anyone in Arras wears glasses these days, thanks to renewal tech, but aside from the spectacles, most of the men in the clipping could pass as current officials in Arras. One in particular. Maybe Jost is right, and I’ve lost my mind. Maybe I’m seeing ghosts.

Jost shakes me, abandoning his rant to get my attention. “Ad!”

I don’t know what to say, so I hold the paper out to him. He takes it and the color drains from his face.

I’m not the only one seeing ghosts.

“How can that be possible?” he asks me.

“A coincidence?” I offer, but no part of me believes it.

“A family member?”

I nod, because even if I can’t accept these explanations, I can’t *comprehend* what Cormac Patton’s picture is doing in a *Bulletin* clipping from Earth that has to be almost two hundred years old. The man looks like him though, right down to his smooth saw and dark eyes.

“Find anything?” the shop owner asks, hobbling toward us. She bobs her head in greeting at Jost, but doesn’t seem excited to see another poor, young person.

“Can you tell us about this?” Jost asks, passing her the paper to inspect. Her eyes slit in concentration but then familiarity dawns in her expression and she leans back on her cane.

“The Cypress Project,” she says with a sigh. “That’s all.”

“That’s all?” I repeat. The Cypress Project. I’ve never heard of it, although I know of Cypress, Arras’s capital metro. The name sends a tingle slithering through my skin.

“Your parents taught you to read,” she says, annoyance seeping into her gravelly voice, “but they didn’t bother to tell you how it happened?”

“You remember it, though?” I ask. “The Cypress Project?”

“Of course,” she says. “You don’t forget that. You don’t forget being left behind.”

“Tell us,” I say, taking her hand gently. “I want to know too.”

Her eyes soften, but then they fall to our hands, clasped tenuously together.

“Get out!” she howls, wrenching her hand from mine like I’ve bitten her.

I fall back against Jost in surprise and his arm circles protectively around me.

“Please!” I beg. “What do you mean ‘left behind?’”

“What the Guild of Twelve Nations did was reprehensible,” she seethes, raising her cane and pointing it at us. “But your kind, what you do, that’s worse. Rebellion and violence—an endless cycle. The Kairos Agenda is unwelcome here. I want no part of it. I’ve lost enough already. Get out!”

Jost pulls me to the door, but I can't tear my eyes from the accusation blazing on her face. It is as though she knows who I am, what I can do, but how is that possible? Bringing my hand up to push Jost's arm off mine, ready to turn and flee, I see what she saw. The same mark that caught the girl's attention last week. A mark so I'll remember who I am. A mark that told her who I was. I raise the hourglass techprint to her as Jost drags me toward the exit.

"This?" I ask. "Is this it?"

"You've been marked, girl," she snarls. "And I'll have no part of it." We're out the door now, and as she clutches the entrance's frame, her shouts echo against the buildings around us. "Give me that paper back."

Jost shoves it into his pocket, and we dart away. I don't feel guilty for taking it. She got fair payment. She only wants to keep it from *me*, but she doesn't know who I am.

No more than I do apparently.

The shop owner limps onto the sidewalk hurling obscenities at us as we go, and calling, "Thief!" But no one this close to the grey market cares. Not at this hour. Until someone does—a figure appearing from the fog cast about us.

"Hold up there," he says. "What's old Greta screeching about?"

FOUR

STEPPING CLOSER TO THE STRANGER, I REALIZE it's the same Sunrunner I saw examining the solar lamp before Valery appeared. He's young, not much older than I am. Even though I know he can't be Guild—not here in the Icebox—his presence, the dominant way he stands, blocking our path, makes me anxious. There's something familiar in his stance—maybe his self-assuredness reminds me of Erik—but it feels like more than that. His hair is cropped close to his head and even though I can't see them in the dark, I know his eyes are brown.

I'm not sure how I know that.

Greta continues her hysterical ravings behind us, and Jost attempts to step around the Sunrunner, but he holds up his hand.

"What's this about, Greta?" the Sunrunner calls out to her.

Jost could probably take him, but he doesn't move. I could use my own considerable skills to get away, but I'm rooted to the spot by the familiarity I feel. The Sunrunners patrol the nicer blocks of the Icebox during the designated commerce hours, but even they're indoors once darkness arrives.

"They're thieves and hooligans," she rants.

"Is this true?" he asks us.

Jost squares his shoulders and takes a step closer to him. "No, we paid her more than what an old book is worth."

Greta hobbles closer to us and when she hears this, she shakes her cane again. "No amount is enough when dealing with your type."

"Hey now." The stranger stops her. "I've never seen these two before, so I know they can't be too much trouble."

The only reason he thinks this is *because* he hasn't seen us before. I know differently.

Greta screws up her face and gives a large huff. "I didn't ask for your help, Sunrunner. You're as bad as they are, so maybe you don't mind keeping company with thieves."

“Some of my best friends are thieves,” he says, his lip tugging up. The movement, though slight, flashes through my mind. One side curves more than the other, but his lips never give way to a smile. I’ve never seen him before but something about him is so *familiar*. “You should get inside. It’s after hours, and there are scarier things than an old crippled woman creeping about.”

I dislike how he speaks to Greta. But there’s no time to call him out on it. Lockdown is imminent, which means the makeshift lighting system will power down for the evening, extinguishing the solar street lamps completely and casting the whole crumbling metro into blackness. The rumors of snatchers and cannibals replay in my mind. We have to get out of here.

“We need to go,” I say to Jost.

“Good riddance,” Greta calls from her shop’s door frame. “Remember, thief, you reap what you sow!”

“Thank you for your assistance,” I tell the Sunrunner. Despite the necessity of moving on, I’m reluctant to see him go. I wish I could unravel his mystery, or, at least, the tangle of knots he’s made of my nerves. “We have a friend to find so we can take shelter.”

“Better to let your friend find you at this hour,” he advises, but I shake my head.

“Not how it works.”

“Ad, he’s probably already back at the hotel. We can’t waste time looking for him when we have ten blocks to travel to get there ourselves,” Jost reminds me. His tone is practical, and it almost convinces me, but I’m skeptical enough of his motives to insist once more that we look for Erik.

“I’m headed back west,” the stranger says. “If you don’t mind falling in with a Sunrunner, we can check for your friend along the way and then you’re welcome to come inside our safe house near the grey market. Ten blocks is too far to safely travel at this point. The Rems will be out soon.”

“Thanks, but—”

“Sounds like a plan,” I interrupt Jost, whose jaw tenses at my rudeness. He doesn’t disagree with me though.

“Excellent. Now I know you’re thieves, but I don’t know your names,” the stranger remarks as we head back toward the narrowing

alleys where we left Erik.

“I’m Adelice, and this is Jost.” It occurs to me too late that I should have lied. If the Guild is looking for us, they’ll advertise our names. Even if they’re anti-Guild, the Sunrunners might see us as something of value.

“Dante.” He holds out a hand, which Jost shakes awkwardly as we hustle toward safety. Dante takes mine next, raising it to his lips. It’s possibly even more awkward than his handshake with Jost.

“Thank you again,” I say, trying to sound sincere, “for stepping in back there, and for helping us now.”

Dante’s helpful demeanor seems out of place in the Icebox. Normally I’d wonder if we were walking into a trap, but I feel inexplicable trust in Dante. I try to shake the warm tendrils of it from my head and heart, but they refuse to budge. It is this more than anything else that pushes me into following him.

“My motives aren’t entirely pure,” Dante says. “Greta’s a cynical old crone, but something about you spooked her, and I’m eager to find out what.”

“I have no idea,” I lie. “We were looking at books, talking with her, and she lost it. I didn’t understand half of what she was saying. I thought she must be crazy.”

“Greta’s angry, but she’s still firing on all cylinders. One of the few left who remembers the Exodus,” Dante says. “She said something about *your kind*. You have no idea why?”

“No.” I keep my eyes on the shops and sidewalks, searching for Erik. I wonder what Dante means by her remembering the Exodus.

“No matter,” he says. “I’ll sort you out yet.”

The statement leaves me uneasy. We might not be walking into a trap, but we aren’t going home with a friend either. The street lamps have faded completely, and only the faintest afterglow remains. The roads are empty, but every now and then I glimpse a moving shadow.

“We won’t find your friend this late,” Dante says, a note of apology in his voice. He flips on a handlight, which is only bright enough for us to see one another.

“He was near here when we left him,” I say, squinting to no avail. We’d have to walk right into Erik to find him now that the lamps are powered off for lockdown.

“We’re close to the house.” Dante directs us a few doors down. His hand skims my back to guide me in the right direction and he removes it quickly, but not before my body reacts to its presence. For a fleeting second, I feel calm. Safe.

Jost leans in to me and whispers, “He’s probably at the hotel. It’s what we agreed on if we got separated, remember? Besides he wouldn’t want you out on the street after dark.”

He’s right, but the decision to abandon Erik doesn’t sit well with me. I trust Erik in ways that his brother can’t, but I don’t trust him to follow a plan, especially while he’s still feeling so bad about not being there for Jost before. Sooner or later, he’ll do something stupid and heroic to prove himself to his brother. I only hope it’s not tonight.

Dante stops at a thick, dark door illuminated on either side by thin spiral bulbs that glow red. He enters a code and waits until there’s an audible *click* before he ushers us inside. The entry deposits us into a holding area, the concrete walls surrounding us broken only by two parallel doors.

“Sally port,” he explains. “It holds us while the laser scanners approve us to enter.”

“Approve us?” I ask. My eyes sweep the small space, looking for the technology that is analyzing us as a green beam of light sweeps down my body.

“Don’t worry,” he assures us, before adding, “unless you’re on a Sunrunner ‘Wanted’ list.”

I bite my lip, not wanting to say that being on a wanted list is a definite possibility. Concrete walls. Laser scanners. This is a place built to keep attackers out. It’s a lot of security clearance, but I guess when you’re running a dangerous operation like solar trafficking, it’s necessary, especially if there are creatures roaming the streets after hours.

The hall on the other side of the holding area is surprisingly warm. Long solar torches hang overhead, and the walls are lacquered in a deep gray. A few broad leather chairs rest in an alcove, but Dante passes them and we follow quickly behind. We enter a lounge area with overstuffed sofas and gleaming walnut tables. On the far wall, a carved mantel arches elegantly toward the ceiling and a fire licks in a cavernous hearth. Small solar lamps with green glass shades light the windowless room.

“I’m famished,” Dante announces. “I’ll have the cook scrounge something together. No promises that it will be edible though.” He gives a sweeping bow followed by a wink as he exits the room. I still don’t know what to make of him.

Considering the canned goods we’ve survived on during the last week, I’m guessing the Sunrunners’ cuisine will be an improvement. One of the perks of controlling the Icebox’s light supply is bound to be better food. Jost and I wander to the fire and settle on the brick hearth to warm ourselves. I’m getting used to the daily chill of Earth, but it’s nice to feel heat on my skin.

Jost doesn’t break the silence; instead he pulls me into his arms and I dissolve against him. In the heat of the fire, I don’t need his warmth, but I long for it. I bury my face under his chin and inhale his scent. He pulls back ever so slightly, but only to bring his lips to mine. I don’t expect it, but I welcome it after the awkwardness between us.

The kiss is slow. On Earth there’s no need to rush. No risk of being caught by the Guild. Realizing that pushes everything else out of my mind, and I focus on the crush of his lips, parting my own to deepen the kiss. He responds by drawing me closer, his hands firmly on my waist.

I push into him and let my own hands drop slowly down his shoulders across his chest, trailing along the waistband of his pants until I bring them to rest on his back. My fingertips are numb as usual but touching Jost sends shivers up my arms. They come to rest deep in my core until every part of me aches. He ends the kiss first, but neither of us breaks from the embrace. Instead his lips linger at my ear.

I want to lock the moment in place and erase the outside world.

Forget my past.

Ignore my future.

Lose myself in him.

But even I don’t have that much time.

When Dante reenters the room, we break apart as he hesitates. I can see him questioning if he should leave us alone, so I motion for him to join us.

“Cook’s on it,” he says. “Now back to Greta.”

He’s not giving up on what happened at the shop, and I don’t blame him. Her frantic accusations have been bouncing around in my head

since we left there. They didn’t mean anything to me, but it’s possible they’ll mean something to Dante. There was a time when I would have guarded the hourglass techprint my father placed on me the night the Guild came to retrieve me because I thought it was a secret code between him and me. A simple reminder to me of who I was. But Greta’s reaction to it rattled me even more than the girl’s recognition of it on the night we arrived here. Do I know who I am? My parents’ actions that night had raised more and more questions in my time at the Coventry. How much had they known? Where were we going? I’d learned nothing is as it seems in Arras. Not even a simple techprint, it turns out.

So I hold out my wrist and show it to Dante. He takes a step forward to examine my offering, and shock flits across his face, quickly replaced by a mask of calm. If I hadn’t been watching him, I would have missed it entirely.

“That explains it,” he says, his voice so low it sends goose bumps popping across my flesh.

“It means something to you then?” Jost asks.

“You don’t know what this is?” Dante asks.

“No,” I admit. Part of me wants to tell him the whole story. That we’re refugees from Arras, about my parents and the tunnels under our house, that we’re running from the Guild. But I keep quiet, waiting to see how he responds, wondering exactly what I’ve revealed to him about myself.

“It’s the sign of Kairos,” he tells us. “It seems I haven’t been very polite. Welcome to Earth.”

FIVE

SOMEONE HAS LAID OUT A FEAST ON a polished black table. The setting is utilitarian. No time wasted on decorations or fancy utensils, but the food is another story. The first course is a salty soup with chunks of white fish and leeks simmered slowly so they melt on my tongue. The soup scorches my throat, and I savor how it floods and stings my mouth, coming to rest hot in my belly. Next a crisp salad smothered in heavy dressing and bits of buttery toast. And then meat. I never knew how much I could miss meat until it sits in front of me. My portion is very small. The large cuts are given to the men, so I cut mine up into tiny bites, watching the red juice seep from my incisions, and chewing each bite for minutes.

This is what Dante calls scrounging something up.

There was a time when I would have pushed my plate away, too anxious to eat, but even though I need answers as to what's happening around me, I'm not passing up a meal after a week with so little food.

"Tell me more about Sunrunning," I say. "I think I'm interested in joining up."

"You're an easy sale," Dante says.

"The way to my heart is through my stomach," I admit.

Jost eats slowly beside me, not saying much. He looks even more thoughtful now that our secret is out and Dante knows we're refugees, but for me, it feels as though a boulder has been lifted from my chest. Dante hasn't said anything more about the techprint, although I'm sure we'll get back to it. It's probably hard to discuss something serious with someone who's stuffing her face.

"One of the perks of the job is food, obviously. We take a quota of goods from the various hydroponic farms in the area and we trade meat and fish with the hunters. There are a few farms on the outskirts of the Interface, but it's a rough business keeping livestock there. Meat's fallen from favor in most of the Icebox since it's so hard to get. Although there's still some canned meat about," he says.

“Lucky for us,” Jost says, but his face is dark.

“It’s a dangerous job. Most of the area outside of the Icebox is uninhabitable.”

“Uninhabitable?” I ask.

“From the mining operations and the bombings during the war.”

Loricel had told me another story about Earth. She had assumed the people left on Earth annihilated one another. It seems they only succeeded in destroying most of the planet.

“I’m talented,” I say, although I’m not actually interested in the occupation. I’m looking for information.

Dante hesitates, running his hand over his short hair. He drops it down and pushes his empty plate away. “You lack certain necessary qualities.”

“How would you know that?” I demand.

“Because you’re a girl.”

“A girl?” I repeat.

Beside me Jost trembles with held-back laughter, and I smack his shoulder.

“You don’t want to underestimate this girl,” he warns Dante.

“I’ve been gathering that much,” Dante says. “It’s more of a policy. Kincaid, my boss, only employs men. Very particular kinds of men.”

It’s implicit in his words that Jost doesn’t qualify, which begs the question of why we are still here. Dante gains nothing from helping us. We have no value in his line of work.

“Kincaid only has interest in women for one reason, and something tells me you, Adelice, might object to the position,” Dante adds. “Trust me, you wouldn’t want to get tangled up in Kincaid’s business. It’s better if you steer clear of him.”

“So you capture sunlight from outside the Interface and sell it as power,” I say, changing the topic before Jost gets upset. If Dante is still talking, I might as well keep him at it.

“We have containment units that turn it into a form of electricity, and then we ration it out to shops and homes.”

Or the highest bidder, I think. “Is that why there is a curfew?”

“Yes,” he says. “We couldn’t supply enough energy to keep the Icebox lit at all times. Here in the Icebox, we’re close enough to the

border of the Interface that the city has longer daylight hours. It's easier for us to replenish the solar panels on the city's power grid."

"Is that why you chose this place?" I ask.

"That," Dante says, "and because Kincaid liked San Simeon. He claims it's because the mountains near his estate prevent Guild interference."

"But you don't think that's it?" I guess.

"When you see his estate, you'll understand what I mean."

"So the people are left in darkness because Kincaid wanted an estate," I remark.

"They have candles. Many ration their supply for private use after hours, but the streets are dark," he says. "It's not possible to set up a community outside the cover of the Interface. There're too many Guild mining operations. We do the best we can."

"We've heard rumors of predators that roam after hours," Jost tells him.

"An unfortunate side effect of turning off the lights. It's why the curfew is necessary."

"But no one is around to enforce the curfew," I point out.

"The curfew isn't enforced so much as understood. If you're out after hours, the Rems could get you. Most don't chance it. There's always a suicidal few though. Rems like the darkness," Dante says.

"Rems?" Jost asks. We've heard the term before but we're no closer to understanding it now.

"Remnants—nasty lot," Dante says.

"Why do they take people?"

"Food mostly."

I'm suddenly glad my own meal is gone and that I haven't asked for seconds.

"Food?" Jost echoes, not quite following him.

"I'm sure you've noticed there's not a lot to go around. They don't discriminate when they hunt and the livestock we do keep is heavily guarded. Wild animals don't make it out of the mining zones. Who knows what the Guild does with them. Anyway, you can cook a human, too," Dante says with a wicked grin, and the contents of my stomach churn a little.

“So they’re cannibals?” I don’t bother hiding my disgust.

“They don’t have the same moral code we do.” He shrugs. “They don’t have souls.”

“I guess not,” Jost mutters, setting his fork down.

“No, literally, they have no souls,” Dante clarifies. “The Guild sends them here, and they’re different from us. They’re smart, capable. They keep to packs. But they’ve been hollowed out, stripped of what makes you and me human.”

Jost’s face pales, and I know what he’s thinking. Rozenn, his wife, who the Guild ripped from the docks of his hometown—has she met a similar fate? I’ve been haunted by the violent death of my father at the barrel of a Guild gun during our escape attempt, but knowing what would have happened if he’d been caught changes things. Although nothing can erase from my mind the image of blood seeping from a black body bag. My mother could have been turned into a Ram, but she was terminated, according to Cormac. Amie, my sister, was safely rewoven to another family. It eases some of the guilt that’s weighed me down since we got here to know that my family was spared from the worst. But how long will Amie be safe?

“Don’t worry, Rems don’t make it long around here,” Dante tells us, responding to Jost’s expression. “The conditions are too uncontrollable, the food too scarce, and sooner or later, the packs turn on each other.”

I remember the storage units housed at the Coventry. I stumbled onto them while searching for information on Amie. Thin strands in crystal boxes. Personal identifying sequences marked ACTIVE. Something clicks into place, leaving a sickening realization in my mind. When I’d ripped people in Arras, their remains had been sent away, and yet I’d known the first time I saw those strands in the depository that they couldn’t possibly be people’s remains. The strands were what was left of them after the Guild had created these monsters. Their souls.

“Why though?” I ask. “Why would the Guild send them here?”

“How do you wage a war without an army? Do you think Guild officials would willingly volunteer? And they can’t send citizens without revealing that Earth exists,” Dante says in an even tone, but there is a fervor simmering below the surface of his words. “The area under the

Interface is totally controlled by Kincaid, but that doesn't mean the Guild is willing to let it go."

War. The inhabitants of the Icebox struggle enough day to day, barely surviving in the conditions caused by the Interface blocking the sun. The Remnants can't merely be to keep them out of the mines, and somehow I know everything is related to the papers we took from Greta's shop. It all comes back to the looms.

"If Kincaid controls the Icebox—" I begin.

"He controls all the territory under the Interface," Dante corrects.

"Okay," I say, "but outside the Interface?"

"That's Guild territory," Dante says. "Their mines occupy a large portion of the uncovered area on Earth."

"But how do you collect the solar energy then?" Jost asks.

"Kincaid doesn't care much about Guild boundaries, but it makes Sunrunning dangerous. If you get caught, you don't come back."

"How do you manage it?" I ask.

Dante leans in and grins. "I don't get caught."

Neither side respects the other's territory. That much is clear. Sunrunners might be dangerous, but they're also the only people with the courage to stand up to the Guild.

"Why did you run from Arras?" Dante asks us.

"We've lost people to the Guild," Jost answers for us. "We saw through the Guild's lies, and the truth brought us here."

Jost is telling the truth without giving anything away.

Dante isn't appeased by this answer. "Strange things have been happening around here. More Guild presence. A ship was downed from the sky. I can't help thinking that your typical refugee doesn't show up with the sign of Kairos printed on her arm."

I swallow hard on the half-masticated steak in my mouth. This is why he's interested in us. "My father did it before the Guild killed him," I admit. "Before I ran."

"And he never explained to you what it was?" Dante presses.

"There wasn't time. The Guild was onto us, so I had to go before I could ask. I assumed it was another Lewys family secret."

"What did you say?" Dante asks.

His face is ashen, and I replay my last words, trying to determine which triggered such an intense reaction. Before I land on an answer, a red light pulses through the room in sync with a shrieking alarm.

“That’s not possible,” Dante says, jumping up and knocking his chair over in the process.

“What’s wrong?” I ask, unease creeping, unwanted, into my chest.

“It’s a perimeter alert. We’ve had a breech in one of the entrances.” He’s already starting down the hall, and we have to race to catch up.

“Remnants?” I ask.

Dante doesn’t respond. He’s busy sliding through screens on a companel. It’s Guild tech, much more advanced than anything we’ve seen on Earth so far.

How flexible are the Sunrunners in their alliances?

He lands on the security stream that shows the point of access. The feed glows green and white, so we can see the movement in the darkness outside. A handful of humans are tearing at Dumpsters in an alley.

“Is that here?” I ask.

“In the back,” Dante murmurs.

Jost thinks to ask a more useful question. “Is this normal?”

“That, maybe,” he says, pointing to the Rems leaping out from the garbage bins, but then he swipes the image to the next feed. “This isn’t.”

The stream shows a crumpled steel door lying on its hinges in the alley. One of the Rems is caught underneath it. It’s a woman from the look of her long hair, but I can’t see her face and she isn’t moving. The feed shifts to show Remnants inside a concrete holding area, much like the sally port we entered through.

“The Guild must have given them some fancy explosives to get through our doors,” Dante says. “They’re not here to blow us up, they’re trying to reap us.”

“Can they get in?”

“Doubtful. The holding areas are triple reinforced—two layers of concrete, and steel supports in between. Anything they used to get through that would kill them, and we have our own booby trap that will be triggered if they try to take out the other door.”

The camera feeding us the stream of the holding area circles to the next corner of the room, and I feel my heart thumping hard in my chest.

I’ve barely glimpsed the footage before the stream changes again, but the last image is all I can process.

They have Erik.

SIX

THE ALARM DOESN'T FADE AND ITS WAIL pierces the air, pounding in my ears. Thoughts and ideas tumble through my head as quickly as they evaporate. How did this happen? How did they know to bring Erik here? Has the Guild found us?

Are we being watched?

Dante wastes no time pulling rifles from a storage unit in the safe house. He starts to hand me one, but hesitates, and I understand what he's thinking. He doesn't want me to go. Maybe Sunrunners don't think much of girls, but I have my own tricks. I refuse the rifle, reaching for a short knife with a serrated blade.

"Jost and I can handle this," Dante says.

"He's right. Those things are after something," Jost says. It's a warning. Jost thinks they've come for me, but there's no reason to believe that. Except that they chose this safe house to attack. And that they took Erik as a prisoner. So actually there are several reasons to think that.

"Maybe," I grant him, "but they aren't going to get it."

The security stream doesn't show anyone near the main entrance, so we head there.

"Don't you have more men?" I ask Dante as we slip into the darkness outside.

"They're around. Some aren't in yet, others are probably already sleeping before they take the early patrol shift," Dante says.

"Should we—I don't know—wake them up?" I suggest.

Dante grabs my arm to stop me, and his eyes look black in the night as he peers down at me. "It's for your own good that I'm not getting anyone involved yet. Once Kincaid knows about you, he'll expect an audience with you—and probably a whole lot more than that. And I won't bring anyone else in until you explain things to me."

"I already did," I whisper.

“No, I want the *whole* story. It’s not a coincidence that they’re here, and I want to know what happened with that aeroship.”

Before Dante can say anything else, Jost pushes him away from me. “Don’t touch her.”

Dante whirls on him, but then calms himself. Instead of forcing it, he heads toward the building’s edge. If Erik weren’t in danger, I’d run now because I’m suddenly afraid of Dante’s intentions. He knows I took down that ship last week. I said something over dinner that spooked him, but nothing that truly gave away me or my unusual abilities. He didn’t respond this way when he saw the techprint. He was curious then, but now he seems to be repressing fury and I know it has nothing to do with the Remnant attack. He’s angry with me.

I’m so preoccupied with this that we’re near the alley before I can process what we’re about to do. Emergency lights flood the area, bathing the alley in more light than we’ve seen on Earth, even during market hours. The unlit parts of the street creep along the corners of my vision, casting shadows into the small alley. Bodies seem to fade in and out of sight.

They’re here, and they see us coming.

“Get out your weapons,” Dante hisses.

The small knife in my hand feels light and useless. I wouldn’t even know how to use it. I may as well try to punch our attackers. I should have asked Dante more about the Remnants. In fact, there are a lot of things I wish I’d asked Dante now that we’re staring down a group of maniacs.

It’s their eyes that scare me. Pupils dilated and stretched past the irises, extending into an infinite nothing. They move with unnatural grace, leaping without fear of falling, and bounding in long strides. The Remnants play with the shadows, popping in and out of sight, seeming to shift and change shape before my eyes. The darkness licks along their limbs, branching like poisoned veins across their arms and faces, but as one glides closer, the black streaks deepen in his skin. They’re *scars*, not tricks of the filtered light.

“Can you weave us out of here?” Jost asks in a whisper, balancing the butt of his rifle against his shoulder and peering along its long, thin barrel.

“I can likely freeze the moment, but there’s nowhere to go.” I see no point in hiding my weaving abilities from Dante if we need to use them. My eyes automatically draw out the strands around us. They’re tangled in a mutilated web. There’s no discernible pattern in the chaos. I can see Earth’s strands. I can touch them, but this world is too unpredictable for me to know for sure what would happen if I created a large warp in the strands.

“I imagine your friend would feel pretty raw if you left him behind,” Dante adds. It’s in the weight of his words, how carefully they’re chosen, how they flow slowly from his tongue—he knows what I am. I don’t know how, but Dante knows I’m a Spinster.

“One thing at a time,” I snap. “I thought we’d deal with the maniacs first.”

“Let’s see what you got,” Dante says.

“Find Erik,” I command Jost.

He nods, but I can tell I’m more inclined to help Erik than he is, so I remind him in a low voice, “He’s your brother.”

“He’s over there,” Dante interrupts us.

Erik is wrestling with one of the Remnants, trying to hold his attacker’s body back with one hand while the Remnant grips his other.

“Erik,” I cry out to him, and then instantly regret it because his head turns toward my voice. For a second, he loses his focus on the Remnant he’s fighting. But before the strange woman can attack him, Dante sends a shot tearing through her body. The Remnant woman trips back and goes limp. It buys Erik enough time to get to us.

“Glad you showed up.” He’s panting.

“Me too,” I say, hoping he doesn’t notice I’m shaking. “How did you know where we were?”

“*I* didn’t,” Erik says meaningfully. “*They* did.”

“What’s he doing?” Jost asks, and I turn to discover Dante has moved away from the group and farther down the alley. At first it looks like he has things under control, but then a Remnant backs him against a tall chain-link fence.

Without thinking, I lurch forward, sprinting toward the pair with my knife in hand. The Remnant pins Dante to the ground, hands gripping his neck. Something whistles past me, but I don’t stop until I’ve reached

them. My hand lashes out with the knife and slices across the Remnant's back. The blade vibrates as it tears along flesh, and it makes my hand tremble.

It's not the kind of wound that will slow him down, but it does make him angry. Dropping his hands from Dante's neck, the Remnant lunges forward onto his palms and hisses under his breath. Dante is free, but now the Rem is after me.

Knife still in hand, I thrust it forward to scare him off. But he laughs. It's a completely normal, human laugh, and it makes me lose my grip on the handle. I recover, but I've lost my defensive posture. Now instead of inching him back, I'm vulnerable. Slowly he moves toward me, with a low growl, moving erratically toward me and pushing me farther and farther toward the fence.

I open my mouth to call out to Jost when a brick cracks against the Remnant's skull. He crumples to the ground, and Dante waves for me to follow him.

"Dante! Adelice!" I look over and see the boys beckoning to us. We sprint toward them and when we reach them Erik grabs my arm. The others keep moving but he holds me back.

"Do you trust this guy?" he asks in a soft voice, even though we're nowhere near anyone.

"Do I have a choice?" I pull forward against his hand.

"This could be a trap."

"If you want to take your chances with them," I say, wrenching my arm free, "be my guest. Those things are from the Guild, which probably means they're after us."

I turn my head enough to gauge his reaction. His eyes narrow a bit, but he starts running. "Who says they're Guild?"

"Dante. He's our one chance at getting out of here."

"That's your problem, Ad," he shoots back. "You only hear what other people tell you."

Before I can ask him what that means, we've caught up with the others, so I let it go. Remnant bodies litter the entrance to the safe house, and I turn away as Dante starts picking off the few survivors trying to crawl away.

“Is that necessary?” I ask as he circles around, checking each one to be certain they’re all dead.

“You saw what they did, and you want to let them go?”

“They’re people—”

He interrupts me, “They’re what’s left of people.”

The Remnant trapped under the door stirs, and Dante’s rifle swings toward her, but not before I see her face in the floodlight.

She’s nothing like the woman I remember. Her previously smooth skin is sallow and waxy. A few of her teeth are broken into stumps, and her eyes, once luminous emerald, are still beautiful but something deadly sparkles in them now. Hideous scars run jagged across her flesh, but they don’t shimmer or flicker—these are not superficial scars, they’re deep and permanent. She struggles against the door that pins her to the ground, and without thinking I reach for the wild strands of the world around me until I latch onto a golden thread of time. It whips through the air as I draw it into a warp. The strand is longer than I expected, and it cracks against the natural elements around it, distorting the air into a blur of color and light.

“Stop!” I cry, but he already has, bewildered by my actions. And then it strikes me that Dante’s not looking at the warp in front of him, but at *her*.

“Who is she?” Jost asks.

Jost moves closer to my side, placing a hand on the small of my back to let me know he’s there. But he has no idea what we’re facing—*who* we’re facing.

Had she come for me? Had they sent her after me? Realization dawns in agonizing ripples. They’d removed her. I hadn’t given much thought to Cormac’s words before—*she was found and removed*—even when Erik warned me she might still be alive. But whether it was from my inability to comprehend what the Remnants were or my unwillingness to, I hadn’t seen this coming. It seems I’ve grossly underestimated the Guild’s cruelty. Again.

“It’s my mother,” I say, trying to pin the statement to the reality of seeing her here in front of me.

Jost’s hand slips and grabs the fabric of my blouse. I can hear his sharp intake of breath, but Dante stays calm, unmoved by my

announcement. *Almost* as if he expected it.

“It *was* your mother,” he tells me, but his words are forced and he doesn’t move to get around my warp. “You’ve been keeping secrets.”

“Can you blame me?” I ask.

“Then they came for you,” Dante says, and I know it must be true. It seemed arrogant to jump to that conclusion before. Now it’s merely a fact. He addresses his next question to Erik. “How did they catch you?”

Erik steps into the light to face him. “The man I was trading with sold me out to the Guild.”

Erik had known the man was curious about his Guild paraphernalia. He must have figured out that Erik was a valuable refugee. And we’d let him walk into the trap alone.

“Why send *her* though?” I ask. The shell in front of me seems unaware I’m her daughter. I can’t see any benefit in using her against me.

“To scare you,” Dante says in a cold voice. “Whatever you’ve done to earn their wrath, they want you to know they’re coming for you and they’ll use any means to destroy you.”

It sounds like he’s speaking from experience.

“Are you going to kill her?” I choke the question out. It might not be my mother any more, but the thought of standing back and letting him murder her claws across my body, squeezing my heart until I’m sure it will shatter. It will be like losing her all over again.

But Dante hesitates at my question, and the pained look on his face mirrors what I feel. He’s closer to this situation than he’s letting on. The Guild must have taken something from him, too. “Not unless you ask me to.”

Whatever the Guild has done to her, forcing her into a half-life, I can’t bring myself to end it. I think of the boxes in the storage facility. It’s possible the rest of her waits inside one, and if so, wouldn’t it be possible to save her—to mend the damage done to her in the sterile clinics of Arras? The technology exists to make a Remnant, perhaps it exists to fix one.

“I can’t let her go without angering Kincaid,” Dante says. “The security feed will catch it, which means I’ll have to take her in.”

“Do you have holding areas here?” Jost asks.

“Not here. Kincaid has holding facilities on his estate, but I can’t protect you from him if I take you there. A refugee is one thing, but a renegade Spinster is another,” Dante tells me.

“I’m guessing after this”—I gesture to the warp—“you couldn’t protect me from him regardless.”

Dante’s attention turns to Erik. “You got a good bit of credit for that Guild paraphernalia, right?”

Erik nods.

“Then let me put this in terms you’ll understand. Adelice is the most valuable Guild paraphernalia on Earth,” Dante says. “Kincaid will want her.”

And like that I’m an object. Something to be collected and used and sold, like a machine.

“What if we don’t want to come along?” Jost asks.

Dante faces him, his shoulders drawing up so that his slight difference in height feels more formidable. “He’ll come after you. We may not have looms here on Earth, but you can’t get far if Kincaid wants you. Your best option for staying alive—and keeping her safe—is to come as an invited guest. Otherwise, he’ll see you as a threat.”

“We’ve been threats before,” I say, taking my place beside Jost.

“You don’t need more enemies than you already have,” Dante warns us. “The Guild overstepped their bounds here tonight. Kincaid won’t overlook this. He’ll want retribution from whomever he can get to after this. At this point, you need him as an ally.”

“I won’t be of any use to him,” I warn Dante. “The strands here are different. I can hardly control my abilities.” The warp I’d made to protect my mother was nothing like the large domes I’d built around Jost and myself in the Coventry. It would have stopped a direct bullet but he only had to change position. I’d barely been able to grab the correct strands.

“You aren’t dealing with the precise patterns of Arras here. This is raw space-time—you can’t control it like you’re at a loom,” Dante says. “Not that I imagine most Spinsters could do what you did.”

Jost steps closer to him and nods at my mother. “What will we do with her?”

I’m grateful he’s changed the subject. I don’t want to explain more about my skills, especially since I’m only now grasping that here I can

touch the raw matter of the universe.

Dante's face is grim, but he's gentle as he lifts the remains of the steel door from my mother. Jost keeps a gun leveled at her, but Dante reaches to take her into his arms. She claws at him, howling, but her injuries prevent her from causing too much harm. Keying in the passcode, he holds her cautiously and eventually she goes limp in his arms as we wait for the door to swing open.

"We have facilities where I can restrain her," Dante says. "She will be fine there until we can move her in the morning. You should rest."

He tilts his head toward a hallway lined with doors.

"Sleeping quarters," he tells us, and then he disappears down the gray corridor without another word.

For a moment, I question if I've done the right thing by keeping her alive, and if I'm making a mistake by sending her with Dante now, but soon worry gives way to a panic building inside me. It rushes through my limbs and stops me in my tracks. The boys freeze alongside me and I feel their concern. But I can't put words to my dreadful realization yet.

This is what the Guild does to traitors, and I committed treason of an extraordinary caliber when I ripped us from Arras to Earth. We might be safe here temporarily, but there's no way to protect those we left behind, and now I know what the Guild does to those they perceive as threats—the monsters they create from them.

And if I don't find the resources to get back to Arras soon, there's no way to prevent them from doing this to Amie.

SEVEN

IN MY SLEEP, I FACE THE GHOSTS that come for me. A wave of Remnants with Amie in the middle, reaching for me. I can only watch as Amie is swept into the crowd of soulless monsters. A new figure emerges where she vanished: a woman with wrists dripping red. The Remnants are gone now. I open my mouth to scream but no sound comes. Blood pools at her feet as she dissolves slowly into a puddle and then another woman rises from it. She's naked, a long scar marring her belly, and her hair on fire. My mother. She points to me accusingly. Her eyes hollow. Dead. Because of me. I will the dream to change, coaxing my mind to wake up, reminding myself this isn't real. But when I open my eyes, I'm at a bar, a whiskey perched in front of me. Next to it rests a tiny card. I lift it to read the inscription.

Drink me.

I look around, wondering where this dream has taken me. The place is familiar although it lacks the color of the real location I encountered in my travels in Arras. Here the bar isn't rich mahogany but a slab of ebony in a gray world. My eyes fall on the swinging doors. He'll arrive any minute.

Cormac. The worst nightmare of all. But it's not him. He's stockier than Cormac with the same easy swagger, but his face is shielded by a fedora cocked too low.

Even as I fight the dream, I drift in and out of consciousness until light breaks into the room. Suddenly Jost's arms are around me, waking me.

"I was dreaming," I murmur.

"Nightmares?"

"Yes."

His arms tighten around me, coming to rest in a cross on my chest. I feel the steady thump of his heart against my back. "You can rest now."

I relax into the security of his embrace, but I don't sleep. We've been on the surface barely over a week, and I've discovered so much. *Too*

much. Seeing Valery, which I am increasingly sure was not my imagination. Being attacked by my mother. The strange experience in the Old Curiosity Shop. Cormac must have a hand in it all, but to what end? Does he hope to scare me back to Arras?

The events of the day crowd my mind, each bringing a question that I can't answer. Sleep becomes impossible while knowing my mother is locked somewhere in the safe house. I replay the attack and rewind farther and farther into my memories of her and my father. My parents were never risk takers. They'd hinted at rebellion in whispered conversations, but the only openly anti-Guild action they ever took was to try to keep me from being retrieved. If there was more to their treachery, it was as hidden as the mysterious tunnels under our house. I wish I could talk to my mother or that my father was alive to direct me. I resented when they got involved with academy issues or offered unwanted advice about classmates. Now I ache for their guidance.

I close my eyes, trying to wash the memory of them from my mind, but they persist in the space between sleep and wakefulness. My parents were affectionate. Kind to each other. But what I remember most is how my father adored my mother. How he tried to fill the void of the third child the Guild would not grant or remedy the scars of her thankless job. Now she's a monster created by the Guild. I squeeze my eyelids tighter, willing myself to sleep, but images from home haunt me. Love notes. Morning routines. My mother pinning up her hair. I catch a glimpse of an hourglass scar behind her ear and startle awake, but close my eyes again quickly lest Jost wants to talk.

Did I imagine it? Have I added the scar to my memory as I try to understand who my mother was, or have I simply overlooked it for years?

My fingers touch my own scar. It feels the same as ever—slightly raised, but hardly perceptible. And yet it throbs, announcing me for who I am. My father's words linger in my mind—*remember who you are*—but I'm no closer now to understanding who I am than I was that night.

As each second ticks by, I see the lies surrounding me. The secrets everyone kept from me. When did my parents dig those tunnels and why didn't they tell me? How did Enora upload the program that led me to the truth on the digifile? Who gave her access? On Earth, the darkness is

everywhere and I’m trapped in it. How can I discover who I am when my world is built of secrets and shadows?

I only know one thing: I’m no safer here than I was in Arras. That’s one message Cormac’s made clear. He knows where I am, and he’s still pulling the strings. So if Kincaid is the most powerful man on Earth, I’m going straight to his compound. Enora told me once to make allies. She couldn’t have been more right.

*

We travel into the mountains the next day in a death trap Dante calls a crawler, which looks like a cage with wheels. Kincaid’s estate rests on several acres located comfortably outside the Icebox but still under the Interface. Far enough away to supervise his business there while still having room to wrap an intimidating perimeter fence around his land. And though I’ve yet to meet him, our first glimpse of his home colors my impression of what kind of man he is. The estate is extravagant in the worst sense of the word. Kincaid must be a man who tries hard to impress if this is where he lives. We can’t drive close enough to the estate to park the crawler there, so Dante stops outside one of the long, winding pathways to let us out. My mother is sedated and bound in the back—for our safety, according to Dante.

The opulence of his estate takes me by surprise. I shouldn’t have expected it to be any different, based on the Sunrunner’s safe house in the grey market, but it pulls at me—the luxury off-putting in a world where there’s not enough food to feed the population. It’s nearly an entire metro unto itself, and I can’t help thinking it puts even the compound of the Coventry to shame. In the center, the main house governs the landscape with its red-tiled roof and twin spires watching over the estate. There are balconies that overlook the magnificent spectacle below. Palm trees and shrubbery line the walkways and everywhere I turn faces frozen in marble stare back at me, locked in a permanent display of horror and beauty for those deemed worthy to enter the estate.

Pillars loom overhead, creating an artificial lighting system that mimics the sun. It’s bright and warm, and the light sparkles off the water in the pools and fountains, nearly blinding me. But tucked behind the

stately buildings and manicured gardens, a series of smokestacks billows against the Interface.

“Jax will show you in,” Dante says, gesturing to a lanky boy waiting at the top of the stairs. “I’m going to see to our prisoner.”

“I want to see her. I need to talk to her,” I say as Dante turns away. I have so many questions for her. No matter what the Guild has done to her, she might still have answers. And I miss her.

“I promise you can later, but right now she needs to be secured for—”

“Our safety,” I finish for him.

“Exactly,” Dante says through tight lips.

The friendliness Dante exhibited toward Jost and me on our first meeting has cooled. He brought us here, starting out at at first light, and he barely spoke to us as we took the twisting roads through the mountains to reach Kincaid. Maybe my talent unnerves him, but I suspect it’s something more.

“Welcome,” Jax calls as he bounces down the steps.

“Kincaid is expecting us,” Dante says.

“I’ll take care of them,” Jax says, “and I have a message for you once you’re done, uh …” He stares at my mother in Dante’s arms, undoubtedly wondering why we’ve brought a Remnant onto the estate.

“I’ll find you later,” Dante says, carrying my mother away.

Jax is so skinny he looks years younger than Jost or Erik. But his eyes are surrounded by wrinkles and they light up when he grins widely as he sticks his hand out to shake each of ours, repeating our names as we introduce ourselves—the greeting so easy and natural that I can’t help but relax a little for the first time since yesterday’s crazy events.

“I had them put some drinks in the assembly room for you,” Jax tells us. “Kincaid is in a business meeting, but he’ll join you at lunch.”

“What’s that?” I ask, pointing to the smokestacks.

“Power plant. It hosts the grids for the estate and the Icebox,” Jax says.

“That’s where you store the solar energy you collect?”

“It’s a bit more complicated than that. We utilize a hybrid photovoltaic system with a coal-based generator that—”

“So basically it’s where the power comes from?” Erik stops him.

“Yeah,” Jax says with a laugh. We follow him into the main building, trailing behind as he chatters about the locations of toilets and how to call a servant. But I’m mesmerized by the statues that lurk in every corner and the detailed portraits that hang from the carved wooden panels. Tapestry after tapestry with precise, intricate embroidery chills my blood. There are faces everywhere, frozen in time, watching me as I enter the house. Between the patterns and colors and ornamentation, my head begins to hurt. The assembly room contains a variety of seating choices, arranged in clusters. Against the far wall, a tall hearth, at least twice my height, lords over the room. My feet sink into the plush, woven rug as I sink into a sofa. The sofa is very elegant and very small, and I perch on it uncomfortably. Jax excuses himself, leaving the three of us alone in the grand room.

“Drink?” Erik asks, lifting a crystal decanter toward us.

“No, thank you,” Jost says, and his formality irks me. Will we ever move past this awkwardness between the two of them?

“Not at the moment,” I tell Erik.

“If it’s poisoned, at least you’ll be rid of me.” Erik shrugs, nonplussed by our refusal, pouring a bit of the amber liquid into a tumbler. He shifts back, draping his arm around the sofa and throwing a leg across the seat. He looks at ease in this setting, not at all put off by the oppressive grandeur of our surroundings.

“So should we take a look around?” Erik asks a few minutes later, depositing his empty glass on the table.

I scoot a coaster under it, afraid to mar the pristine wood. Something tells me this Kincaid fellow would notice.

“This place has to be crawling with security,” Jost points out. “Maybe we should wait a day or two before we label ourselves troublemakers.”

With their cards on the table, the brothers glare at each other, and then inevitably turn to me—tie-breaker extraordinaire.

“Jost is right,” I agree, although I hate to take sides. “And they’re probably listening to us now. I bet we wouldn’t get far.”

“Well that only leaves the elephant in the room then,” Erik says. “Your mom.”

Suddenly I want to jump up and go exploring. Anything to avoid this conversation, but I can’t ignore it forever. “So my mom’s a Remnant.”

It’s liberating to say it out loud, as though I’ve taken the first step in accepting the fact.

“Yes, but what is a Remnant exactly?” Jost asks. “How did the Guild do this?”

“I interacted with them. They’re as smart as we are, maybe even more cunning, like they’ve been tuned into some primal frequency,” Erik says.

“But how?” Jost’s question feels more desperate this time, and I think of his wife.

“We know the Guild can remap and alter. They did it to Enora,” I remind him, taking his hand.

“They seem to have perfected their technique,” Jost mutters.

I frown. He’s right. Enora’s alteration backfired horribly, resulting in her suicide, but the Remnants seem fully functional. “Listen, there’s something I haven’t told you,” I whisper. I relay the story of the clear cubes tucked away in storage at the Coventry.

“What do you think they are?” Jost asks.

“Souls,” I say without hesitation. “Dante told us they remove the Remnants’ souls, and the strands I found were too thin to be full people. I knew that then, but Loricel told me that people who die before they’re ripped lose part of their strand. I think it’s the key to understanding this. Spinsters rip people so the Guild can reuse them.”

“So they separate the soul from the body?” Jost muses. “But why? It seems like a lot of work for no good reason.”

“Take Enora. They didn’t remove her soul, so it didn’t work.”

“But why wouldn’t they remove Enora’s soul if it was going to cause a problem?”

“I can’t say exactly, but if I had to guess I think it comes back to something Loricel told me. Cormac was scared to do it to me. That’s why they tested it on Enora, and when it backfired, they couldn’t be sure I wouldn’t have a similar reaction,” I tell them.

“But they were planning to map you,” Erik says.

“No,” I say slowly as the pieces start to fit together. “They’d already mapped me. Cormac was positive they could splice my skill set into another Spinster, someone ready and willing to do what they asked. Someone who wouldn’t reject the manipulation.”

“Who?” Jost asks.

“My guess?” Erik says. He pours another drink and doesn’t meet our eyes. “Pryana. She’s as power hungry as Maela, but easier to control. That must have been why she was there that night.”

I’d forgotten Pryana was there on the night of our escape. Her presence had seemed so trivial. Pryana blamed me for her sister’s death after Maela, the manipulative Spinster in charge of our training, made an example of my refusal to rip a thread from Arras. Maela took out an entire academy instead, Pryana’s sister included, and ever since, Pryana had been eager to rise to a position of power over me. Of course she’s the Spinster Cormac would choose for the experiment. He enjoys making me squirm.

“But if the technology hadn’t worked, they’d have jeopardized you and her,” Jost says.

“They weren’t going to use me,” I remind him. “They were going to take Loricel’s skills. If they did that, they wouldn’t have to manipulate me much, only enough to make me Cormac’s perfect bride.”

“You know, I have to feel a little sorry for Cormac,” Jost says. “You are quite the catch.”

Erik raises his glass and says, “I’ll drink to that.”

For a second they grin at each other, but Jost’s smile slips first.

“How would they have done this? Who has the ability to alter a person’s personality and memories? Their skills?”

“Someone at one of the other Coventries,” I guess. “Loricel told me she once assisted with the memory wipe of the entire population of Arras for the Guild, which means others helped.”

“It’s hard enough to keep the entire Western Coventry in line. I can’t imagine how they managed it elsewhere,” Erik says.

“Maybe it’s not Spinsters,” I say. The memory of the mapping session niggles at my mind. It was overseen by a doctor. Loricel wasn’t present at all.

“Kincaid better have answers,” Erik mutters.

“And I promise you I do,” an airy voice proclaims. The man appears out of nowhere, but behind him I spy an elevator door sliding closed. As soon as it shuts, the panel blends in with the carved wooden wall. “But your guesses aren’t bad. You’re close, children.”

I ignore the “children” comment. As one of the Coventry’s newest recruits, I’ve dealt with my fair share of simpering adults. Instead I stand in greeting. “Kincaid, I presume.”

“Dear girl, you presume correctly!” His voice peaks, and Kincaid claps his hands in delight. He’s wearing a smoking jacket, tied at the waist, and what appear to be velvet house slippers. We’re not the only ones dressed down for the occasion.

“Care to tell us which part we were close on?” Erik asks, not bothering to straighten up.

Kincaid’s taut features slacken when he takes in Erik’s overly comfortable appearance, and I frown in disapproval. Erik gets the message and sits up.

“All in good time,” Kincaid assures us. He extends his arm to me. “But first, strangers must become friends.”

EIGHT

MY STOMACH FLIPS WITH ANXIETY AS WE take our places at the long dining room table. The table could seat a good portion of the Western Coventry's Spinsters easily. The table is set formally with an array of cutlery and folded linen napkins. Crystal goblets are already filled with cold, fresh water and thin, red wine. A feast is placed before us by a valet. Some of the dishes are familiar staples, like a basket of bread, but others are new to me. I'm particularly drawn to a dish of fresh broccoli and roast fowl—chicken, perhaps—spread over a delicate brown sauce that wafts the aroma of garlic. I'm pleased to see that the greenhouse I spotted on the edge of the estate is being put to use. It doesn't feel like the kind of meal one serves to prisoners, so I presume Kincaid views us as guests—as Dante hoped he would.

Kincaid presides at the head of the table. Dante sits at the other end.

"Your house is lovely," I force out as naturally as possible.

"The *estate* is to my taste. Before the war it was called the Enchanted Hill. It belonged to a fellow named Hearst, but he's dead now," Kincaid says.

What an odd thing to say. Of course he's dead.

"So you're refugees," Kincaid says, ignoring the plate of food in front of him.

I nod, scooping broccoli into my mouth.

"I've seen the footage from the incident at the safe house—unpleasant business," Kincaid continues, flicking the air like the attack was a mere annoyance. "A renegade Spinster is quite the treasure. I'm sure the Guild would love to have you back."

I set my fork down and meet his gaze. "I'm not going back."

Beside me Jost and Erik stop eating, waiting to see how this will play out, but Kincaid wheezes a low chuckle.

"I'm not going to give you over to them if that's what concerns you," he says. "The Guild and I are neither strangers nor *friends*."

His words reassure me, but I can’t continue eating despite how warm and savory my first bite was.

“Eat, child,” he prompts me.

“I’m afraid I find talk of the Guild rather unappetizing,” I admit. My thoughts straddle two realities: this one, where Kincaid is telling me about his relationship to the Guild, and the one I know exists elsewhere in this prodigious estate. I feel safe for the moment, but knowing my mother is here, locked away somewhere on this property makes me feel again like the girl who was dragged from her home by a retrieval squad. I hadn’t been able to eat more than a bite or two of the dinner Mom cooked for me the night of my testing, so it’s only fitting that the awareness of my mother—alive and imprisoned—is enough to revert me to the girl I used to be.

“We’re of the same mind.” He gestures to his untouched plate. “The victims of the Guild usually are.”

My curiosity is piqued. “Victims?”

“I have a rather sordid past,” Kincaid admits.

“Don’t we all,” Erik quips, but the mood at the table remains heavy.

“I was once an official myself.”

The confession catches me off guard and I grip the tablecloth in front of me. Why didn’t Dante mention this before?

“I’m in exile,” Kincaid says, tearing apart a roll and slapping several pats of butter on it. He’s surprisingly thin if this is how he eats.

“Exiled to Earth?” I ask.

“Cormac and I had a disagreement about the way Arras should be run. Unfortunately when it came time to take sides, I discovered most of my friends shared Cormac’s antiquated notions. The Guild wouldn’t accept change if they could stop it, and with the looms they could. They didn’t see the merits of progress.”

“And you do?” Erik challenges him.

“When I came back here, I had nothing,” Kincaid says, his knuckles white around his butter knife. “Earth was dying. I built this city, creating a refuge of stability that could stand up to the Guild, and helped stabilize the solar energy trade.”

“He monopolized the solar trade,” Dante corrects, and then grins, but the smile stops before it reaches his eyes. Kincaid doesn’t notice.

“‘Take mercy on the poor souls for whom this hungry war opens his vasty jaws,’” Kincaid tells him. He turns to us and simply says, “*Henry V*. Shakespeare.”

How romantic of him.

“Well, I’d call my work progress. There would be no power under the Interface without my efforts, so it’s best for everyone that I oversee the operation. My ideas weren’t welcome in Arras—especially among the likes of Cormac Patton. Who could have imagined that being exiled would prove so liberating? Turning against the Guild was the best decision I ever made.”

“Then we have even more in common,” I say, willing my voice to stay steady regarding this news. “We’re both renegades.”

“Ahh, yes. I like that, having things in common with you.”

His words are honey sweet, meant to be endearing, but they grate against my ears. I know better than anyone that having been part of the Guild doesn’t automatically qualify one as a villain, but I’m reluctant to take his admission at face value.

Before the conversation can continue, a woman sweeps into the room. The train of her low-backed gown trails behind her. Despite its high neckline, only sheer mesh covers her skin, and across it a snarling dragon breathes fire. The embroidery is elegant and lends an exotic air to her entrance. Her hair nests on top of her head and tendrils curl down against her neck. When she turns, I stifle a gasp. Her cosmetics are less tasteful than the ones she wore in Arras. Her skin is painted milky white, her cheekbones rouged deep pink, and her lips drawn into a tiny red heart, but her toffee eyes are the same, even with the petite peacock feathers that dance at the ends of her lashes.

Valery.

“Darling, you’re late for lunch.” Kincaid’s tone is simpering, and I get the impression he’s putting on a show.

I meet Jost’s eyes and then Erik’s, and I know we’re debating the same question. Do we say something or pretend not to recognize her?

In the end, Valery chooses for us. “You can’t rush perfection,” she simpers back, and the whole act is quite sickening. “That’s something Adelice knows.”

“Then you’ve met our delightful new friends,” Kincaid cries in his giddy, childlike way. “Tell me how!”

“I was Adelice’s aesthetician at the Coventry before I sought sanctuary with you,” she says.

I can’t keep the words from tumbling out. “I thought you were dead.”

“Thought or hoped?” The venom she displayed to me in our last conversation before she disappeared from the Coventry drips from her words, but she smiles brightly to cover it. We had been friends once, but Valery disappeared before either of us had come to grips with the suicide of Enora, my mentor and Valery’s lover. “Loricel aided my escape, and Kincaid granted me safe passage.”

“As I’ve said, any enemy of the Guild is a friend of mine, and how fortunate I am to make such a lovely friend.” He draws Valery’s hand up to his mouth, and I see a flash of her red fingernails. Instantly I’m reminded of a moment I witnessed in the hall of the High Tower. Her red fingernails on Enora’s back.

“But you’re—” I choke the last word back. If Loricel had managed to help her escape, why did she lead me to believe Valery was dead? It isn’t my place to bring up the past, not before I’ve had a private moment to talk to Valery about her change of … heart.

Valery arches a perfectly shaped eyebrow at me, a challenge. “Forgive me, Adelice. We parted under trying circumstances.”

“There’s nothing to forgive,” I murmur. “If I had known you were alive, I would have tried to help you.”

“Others helped me,” Valery tells us. “Earth is far from the ideal hiding place, as I’m sure you’re discovering, but Loricel made a compelling argument.”

“Which was?” Erik asks.

“Run or be ripped. Not much of a choice. I might have done it years ago if I’d known about Kincaid. He immediately opened his home to me.”

“I had not thought I could love again until Valery entered my life,” Kincaid says, raising her hand to his lips.

My head is starting to spin and I stare down at my plate, wondering if food might help me digest this news, but I discover it’s gone, stripped away by the valet while I was distracted. My fingers reach for a lock of

loose hair and I twist it nervously. Valery and Kincaid can't have known each other more than a few days. It doesn't make sense.

"My dear, your arm," Kincaid says.

Without the jacket I left in the drawing room, the burns I suffered from the falling aeroship debris are evident. They've healed into rough scabs that are more unsightly than painful. I shrug it off, flashing a smile at Dante, whose eyes narrow.

"An accident," I assure Kincaid.

"They look like chemical burns," Dante says. It's an innocuous comment, but he's already accused me of bringing down the aeroship our first day on Earth and I know he's tallying this as further evidence.

"I insist that one of my men take a look at it. Don't let your time in the Icebox fool you," Kincaid says. "We're not all barbarians here. We have our own renewal-patching methods available."

I thank him although I have no intention of taking him up on it.

"Ahh, dessert," Kincaid calls as a server appears with another platter. "Sweets for my sweet." Valery giggles and nuzzles his hand.

"If I ever act like that, promise to kill me," I whisper to Jost.

"Deal," he says without hesitation.

This is why our relationship works.

Across from us, Erik is chewing on his cheek in what I'm guessing is an attempt to bite back laughter at the absurdity of the scene in front of us.

Despite the whirl of emotions I'm feeling, I take a spoonful of the custard in front of me. It melts across my tongue and floods my mouth with the slightest sweet creaminess. One more bite reveals spicy chocolate swirled through it.

"Lovely, no?" Kincaid asks with greedy eyes.

"It's delicious," I admit, but I set down my spoon. I've been a gracious guest, but I have something I need to do.

"Kincaid has excellent taste in everything he procures," Valery tells me. There's a warning in her voice and I search her face for a signal, but it stays placid under her mask of cosmetics.

"Dante said you could help us," Jost says, clearly having grown impatient with the doublespeak.

Kincaid leans forward in an ominous way, dabbing the corners of his mouth with a linen napkin. “We’re going to help each other.”

NINE

THERE'S NO LOGICAL REASON TO GO TO her, but I excuse myself from lunch early, ready to hold Dante to the promise he made when we left the safe house. Given the events of the past week, I'm reeling as though my world is turning so fast, spinning so uncontrollably, that I can't count on my feet to hold me upright. When I left the Coventry, I was an orphan, but now my mother is alive. It's too much to process. I knew who I was a week ago, but I'm not so sure anymore, and my mother is the one person who might have the answer.

The guards give me a little grief when I ask to see my mother, but Dante himself called in the request, so they acquiesce.

Of course, I'm not sure that I want to see my mom.

They're keeping her in the highest-security facility they have on the estate. A guard leads me there past dusty paintings, rolled-up rugs, and discarded busts that there must be no additional room for in the main house. As we walk, he explains what will protect me from her trying to attack. I never thought I'd have to be protected from my mom. It seems like uncertainty is the only sure thing these days.

"It's a huge power drain," the guard tells me as he leads me down a barely lit corridor, past dozens of empty cells. "We usually don't keep Remnants more than a few hours before …"

He hesitates, but I already know the answer.

"Before you execute them," I finish.

"It sounds horrible," he says. "But we've tried to help them. We've done everything we can. There is no redeeming these creatures."

"Creatures?" There's disgust in my voice, but I know I'm being a hypocrite. Don't I think of them the same way?

"You've seen them. What they can do. You can waste your time feeling sorry for them if you want, but not all of us have that luxury." He keeps his face turned from me as he speaks.

I wonder who he lost to this dirty war between worlds. It's in his voice—the pain of it.

“So why are these such a drain?” I ask, shifting the topic back to the cells, which look ordinary enough to me.

“These ones aren’t. We primarily use them for holding Rems before termination. But our newest visitor is going to be staying awhile. She’s been patched up and healed, so Dante wants to be sure she doesn’t try to escape.”

“You catch a lot of Remnants?” I ask, wondering at the need for so many enclosures.

“A fair few,” he hedges before abruptly adding, “We’re here.”

He stops at a small gray door and enters a code. The door zips open and I follow him into the high-security cell. The room is lit by halogen but only enough for me to make out her shape lying in the corner. There are two sets of bars between us, which seems a bit excessive.

“You want me to stay with you?” he asks, but I can hear how much he’s hoping I’ll say no, so I shake my head.

“I’ll be fine,” I say confidently. After all, it is my mother.

“Okay,” he says, but he doesn’t sound convinced. “Whatever you do, don’t stick your hands through the bars.”

I glare at him. “Or she’ll bite me, right?”

“No,” he says, pretty patiently considering how surly I’m being. He pulls something from his pocket and tosses it through the bars, but it doesn’t make it into the cell. Instead it cracks and sizzles as it makes contact with an invisible wall between the bars. A moment later a thin layer of ash drops to the ground.

Well, that explains the power drain.

“Don’t you think that’s a bit much?” I ask, staring at the ash.

“You’ve seen them in action. What do you think?”

He has a point, but I don’t tell him so. “I’ll keep my hands to myself,” I assure him.

He gives me a bemused look and leaves me alone. My mother stays in the corner, not acknowledging my entrance.

“Mom,” I call softly. Then I feel silly. Whoever this woman is, she’s not my mother anymore and she’s not likely to remember she once was. But to my surprise, she turns her head to stare at me.

“Mom.” I try again.

She rolls over, keeping her eyes on me. They've cleaned her up, given her fresh clothes, and brushed her hair. It strikes me as odd that they'd bother with such things for someone they don't consider human.

I smile, hoping to make her feel safe, to coax her into speaking to me.

She bares her teeth.

"Mom," I say again, this time more sternly. Ironically, I'm channeling how she used to sound when I was being reprimanded.

She closes her lips back over her teeth and then she starts to crawl toward the bars. This was a horrible idea. Why did I want to see my mother like this? What does it matter if they terminate her? This woman is nothing like the parent I lost.

When she reaches the bars, she uses them to pull herself up. And then she brushes off her pants and turns her eyes to mine. I notice a scar, thicker than the rest, glinting silver-white on her forehead.

"Adelice," she murmurs, but it sounds more like a hiss.

It's not my mother's voice. Still, she remembers me.

"I'm not sure why I came," I admit. My words bounce around the mostly empty room, leaving a faint echo.

"You came to see your mother," she says, "but we both know I'm not really your mother, Adelice."

I've seen Remnants attack, and the amount of destruction they can inflict, and yet, listening to her speak so coherently shocks me. She'd howled when we took her into the safe house.

"You thought I'd be some kind of zombie," she says.

I nod.

"You assume that because we attack you, we're animals, but we're not," she says angrily.

"Then what do you do with the people you take?" I ask. "Why attack at all?"

She looses a hollow laugh. "Survival, child. We can't all make it here."

"We'd stand a better chance if we worked together," I say.

"An idealistic dream," she scoffs.

It's in the way she says it. The way her eyes seem to lock on mine but still look right past me. There's something missing, something vital. Never has *Remnant* seemed like such a fitting term.

“How do you know who I am?” I ask.

She stares at me and her lips curl up at the corners. “You’re hoping I’ll admit to some latent memories, I assume. That deep down I remember being your mother.”

I back up a few steps. Each of her words stings a bit more than the last.

“Rest assured, I do remember my life before,” she says, keeping her eyes on me. “I remember getting coffee and making dinner and wasting every night trying to rescue you. What I don’t remember is *why*. Why I did any of it. But that’s not the only reason I know your name, Adelice.

“We were prepped to look for you,” she admits with a wicked smile. “We were shown pictures, told about who you were and that we must retrieve you at any cost.”

“Retrieve?” Nothing about what she’s telling me is a surprise except this.

“Or kill,” she coos.

That’s more like it.

“I remembered you, of course. I could foresee every stupid move you would make. Coming to rescue your friend. It was my idea to snatch him. I would be embarrassed by how predictable you are—how much you let those boys influence your actions—if I cared. If I was still trapped in Meria’s pathetic mind-set. But I’m not. That’s why he put me in charge of the troops. Because I’m perfectly in control of myself. And because I know you.” She turns her eyes from mine and the scar comes into harsh relief, cutting across her cheekbone. Her clothes prevent me from seeing how far it goes.

“He?” I ask, even though I don’t need to ask who she’s talking about.

“Your jilted fiancé,” she mocks. “Cormac misses you desperately. Tell me, Adelice, would you have invited me to your wedding?”

“Probably not,” I say coolly, although invisible screws twist my insides. “Maybe you can come to my funeral.”

She finds this very funny.

“I was told you were dead,” I tell her.

“Your mother is dead,” she says. “She died after she was stuck in cold storage for months.”

“Is that where you were?” I ask, thinking of the threads I removed as a Spinster.

“There were a lot of us that needed the procedure. I had to wait my turn.”

So they froze her until they could pull her soul strand. That means somewhere in Arras there’s a lab devoted to preparing Remnants to come to the surface.

“Will you tell him this?” she asks.

“Who?” I ask.

“The Sunrunner,” she breathes. “Dante.”

I stare at her. How does she know his name? “No,” I murmur. “Not yet. Why do you care if Dante knows?”

“I could lie and tell you we were prepped on him,” she says, “and we were, to a point. But I know Dante very well. It’s another reason Cormac chose me to lead the new contingent. You should ask Dante why I’m here. Why he didn’t execute me.”

“You’re here because Dante wants me to help him and he figured killing my mom wasn’t going to ensure my loyalty,” I say defiantly.

“Ask him when you’re ready to learn the truth then,” she says.

I’d suspected Dante was hiding something, but why does my mother know what it is? I’ve had enough of this conversation so I rap a couple times on the steel door and wait for the guard to open it.

She may not be my mother anymore, but she knows me as well as my mother once did, and that’s what scares me.

Dante is waiting outside the cell block as though he’s anticipating my next move. Lounging against the door, he looks agitated, even more so than he’s been since the Remnant attack. He’s dressed down from his flashy attire into a pair of jeans, and he’s fiddling with something in his hands. A digifile.

“Is this the best place to have this conversation?” I ask him in my most confrontational tone. Seeing him here, I’m sure that he knew my mother would direct me to talk to him.

“No, let’s go to the fountains. And, Adelice”—he pauses—“keep the questions to yourself until we get there.”

I do as he requests but only because I’m not sure what to ask first, and because the time it takes us to walk outside and down into the gardens

allows me to calm the anxiety that has built up inside me since my mother pushed me to speak with him.

“The surveillance can’t hear much with the water,” Dante says as we sit on the edge of the fountain. It’s cold and water sprays my back slightly, but I don’t care.

“I know. Jost and I used this trick to block the audio transmitters in the Coventry,” I tell him.

Dante fidgets with the digifile, flipping it from hand to hand. “He’s smart. Seems nice. Do you love him?”

It’s a totally inappropriate question and it catches me by surprise. “I’m not sure that’s your business.”

“Fair enough,” Dante admits. “I was merely interested.”

Interested in what? Me? He didn’t ask flirtatiously—more like an old friend trying to catch up on the latest news. But we’re not friends. Not yet.

“I brought this so I could scan your techprint,” he says.

“I have questions first,” I say, holding my arm to my waist. “Lots of them.”

“I know that, Adelice,” Dante says in a quiet voice. “I do, too. I think some of the answers we’re looking for are encoded in that hourglass though.”

It never occurred to me to try to scan the techprint my father left on me. I’d accepted my father’s simple explanation that it was to remind me who I was, but now that I’ve learned it is the sign of Kairos, I realize it might hold more answers.

“I have one, too,” Dante says, revealing his wrist to me.

I swallow hard. Why has he waited so long to show me this?

“What does yours say?”

“Nothing spectacular. I had reasons for seeking refuge here,” he says. “It was my ticket in, and it helped me get in with Kincaid.”

“He’s more than a Sunrunner,” I surmise.

“Much more,” Dante says. “I can show you new ways of looking at the world, Adelice, but first, I need to see what that techprint says.”

Ready for answers, I thrust my wrist out to him. He takes it gently, and his hand is warm on my skin, sending the oddest sensation of comfort traveling up my arm. The digifile takes a long while to scan.

“Sorry, we only get the castoffs that refugees bring from Arras,” he apologizes, and then the information displays. I can’t read what it says, but the words reflect in his wide eyes.

“Did you find what you were looking for?” I ask.

Dante waits a long moment before he responds, and when he does, his hand grips my wrist tightly.

“It says I’m your father.”

TEN

THE MOMENT LOCKS IN PLACE, MY MIND frozen like a blank screen as shivers ripple from my fingertips to my throat. Suddenly I'm falling, but I never jumped. It's the sensation of the world slipping away.

This is what my mother was trying to tell me, why she pushed me to seek answers from Dante. How is this possible? Dante is barely a year or two older than me.

A voice calls me back, and I find I'm still on the edge of the fountain.

"Come on, you're getting wet," Dante says.

And in that moment, he sounds downright *fatherly*.

"You're lying," I say, pulling my arm from him.

"It's right here," he says, holding out the digifile. "Your parents encoded it in your techprint."

"My father is dead," I spit at him. "Benn Lewys died on the night of my retrieval. Whoever you are, whatever happened between you and my mom, nothing changes that."

I don't stop running until I'm back inside. He doesn't stop calling after me.

*

Jost's bedroom is across from mine. I stare at his door, knowing it's late, knowing I don't want to talk, knowing he's asleep.

But also knowing that the door will open if I twist the knob.

I do it. His room is too dark to see much. A single beam of light from the security system outside evades the blackout curtains, cutting across the floor and falling on Jost's still form. I tiptoe to his bedside and watch him sleep. A pillow is twisted in his arms and his hair covers his face. He breathes slowly and rhythmically, and I count each inhale and exhale, willing the steadiness of it to calm me.

When it doesn't, I climb into bed next to him. He rolls over and wraps an arm around my waist, but his eyes don't open.

“You’re still dressed.”

I press into him. I don’t want to explain why I’m awake. I don’t want to share what I’ve seen or learned today. Not yet. Not while I still don’t understand any of it.

“Can’t sleep?” he asks.

“I haven’t even tried yet,” I admit.

“Do you want—”

I know he’s going to say *talk*, but I don’t give him a chance to ask. I don’t want to talk. I don’t even want to think, so I stop the question with a kiss.

He doesn’t object.

In fact, his whole body says yes. His fingers find my jaw and he holds my mouth to his. His grip loosens and his hands slip into my hair, holding me to him. The room falls away. There is only him, and the wonder of how soft his lips are. This is the only real thing I have left. The taut muscles of his back, coiled like wire, as he hovers over me. The way my body aches to float up, to close the space he’s left open between us, but his hands hold me in place.

I stretch against him. His touch erases the agony I feel in my chest, leaving traces of fire where our skin connects.

“I need you,” I murmur into his ear and he responds by drawing me up, his hands cocooning my back. He cradles me gently as our limbs lengthen and intertwine like vines growing into one another until I can no longer remember where I end and he begins.

But the barriers between us remain intact, and his lips leave mine as he drops them to my ear. “What are you running from, Ad?”

He knows me too well. I rejoice in this knowledge even as I deny it. “I’m not running.”

Jost drops to his back, his hand wrapping into my own. “I won’t make you talk, Adelice, but I wish you would.”

I’m not ready to face this—not even with him, so I turn to him and run a tremulous finger down his cheek. “I’m not running from anything,” I whisper. “I’m running *to* something. I’m running to you.”

He doesn’t ask to talk again.

ELEVEN

THE LIBRARY SPANS A SPACE AS LARGE as the dining hall in the Coventry, books tucked behind lattice doors. Someone has lit a fire in the hearth, and its heat radiates through the room. I'd never imagined so many books could exist. My experience is limited to the fifteen or twenty hidden in my parents' room. Here stories from men about the nature of the universe mingle with tales of all-powerful creators. I come from a world created by men, but on Earth, they don't know how we came to be, whether we are the product of spectacular chance or divine intervention. I find poetry and prose, history and science mixed together into a world of words and thoughts.

Most of the history books are dated. None of them were written after the building of Arras or the Exodus from Earth. I doubt anyone writes books anymore. I flip through them, looking for clues that will link this reality with the one I knew once, but the volumes are full of history I've never heard of, places with names that are lost, and people who died long ago.

"I collect them." Kincaid's proclamation is nonchalant, but I can tell by the tilt of his head that he hopes I'm impressed.

"My parents did, too," I say.

Kincaid slides onto the sweeping arm of a sofa, leaning forward. "So you were raised to be a rebel."

"No—I was raised to blend in," I correct him.

"And yet here you are. A girl who reads books and runs from the Guild while your mother sits in my prison," he says with a smile that stops on his cheeks. His eyes stay snakelike, darting ever so slightly at the smallest of my movements.

"Is that a problem?" I ask.

"Not for me. Not yet," Kincaid says. "My informants within Arras tell me the Guild is none too happy about your unexpected departure from service. It seems you were more than another Spinster to them."

I keep my gaze leveled on his beady eyes, forcing myself not to blink.

“Don’t fret, child. I’m thrilled you came to me. Any enemy of Cormac Patton is a friend of mine. ‘The signs of war advance,’” Kincaid quotes. “But I wonder why you are here. What are your plans?”

I’m not sure I can trust Kincaid. I know I don’t like him, but he’s opened his home to us. He’s also as eager to destroy Cormac as I am. I turn my attention back to the shelves. “I want answers about this world and Arras. I was hoping to find a book about Kairos.”

“That will be a problem,” Kincaid says, a note of apology in his voice. “Not many books have been published since the Exodus.”

“That’s unfortunate.”

“It is, isn’t it? I never took to the Guild’s desire to limit the arts. They felt the arts were too dangerous to the controlled history, but I think it’s barbaric. It’s one of the reasons I settled here. The Guild occupied this estate for a long time. Apparently they weren’t interested in cultivating the arts in Arras, but they were keen on preserving those they took control of on Earth. I have been a much more attentive owner. My staff takes care to attend to the sculptures and libraries, so I’m certain you will find many treasures in my home.”

I’m not exactly interested in Kincaid’s artistic ambitions, but I nod to show I appreciate his effort. “What is Kairos?” I prompt.

“The correct question is, *who* is Kairos?” Kincaid says.

“Kairos is the name of a scientist, or at least, he’s come to be known as that. I’m told you bear his mark,” he says, returning to my original query.

I hesitate but then I stretch my arm out to confirm it. I see no point in hiding this information. He already knows I’m a traitor to the Guild.

“Who was he then? Kairos?” I ask.

“That’s complicated,” Kincaid stalls.

“Come on. I showed you mine,” I press.

Kincaid’s mouth twists into a bemused grin. “He was the scientist who started the Cypress Project. Rumor is that he didn’t hold with the Guild’s ultimate plan. Bit of a legend here actually.”

“What happened to him?” I ask.

“He vanished.” He sweeps a hand through the air, opening it with a flourish. “Poof! Some of the people left behind after the Exodus dubbed themselves the Kairos Agenda, determined to continue his work.”

“They rose up in his memory?”

“More or less,” Kincaid confirms. “Unfortunately, their ambitions died out as the resistance to Arras grew more futile.”

“But the Agenda had a plan to fight back against the Guild?” I ask.

“The Agenda believed Kairos left behind a machine.”

“A machine?” I ask in a breathless voice. “What did it do?”

“No one knows. It’s only known as the Whorl. Its myth is almost as legendary as Kairos himself. Some believe the Whorl could give Earth control over Arras.”

“Instead of the Guild controlling us,” I say.

“I believe it could do more than that. Kairos wanted to end Arras’s dependence on Earth. His machine would have to do more than simply control Arras. I vowed years ago to find it and finish Kairos’s work. If Arras became independent from Earth, this planet could prosper again. I ‘have no delight to pass away the time; unless to spy my shadow in the sun.’”

“Shakespeare?” I guess.

“An indulgence of mine,” he says.

I make a mental note to procure a volume of Shakespeare’s collected works to add to my book of sonnets. Studying them might give me better insight into Kincaid.

“If you’re right, with the Whorl, both worlds could exist?” I ask. It’s too much to hope for.

“I’m almost certain of it, but I’ve had my own men searching for intelligence on the Whorl for years.” Kincaid sinks back against the sofa, and my pulse quickens. He might have the information about the Guild.

“No luck?”

“False leads and dead ends. It probably doesn’t exist.” Kincaid pauses before adding, “But one can hope.” He stands and offers his arm to me, and my heart sinks. I loop my arm through his and he leads me away from the library.

“So that’s all there is?” I ask. “Rumors? Lies?”

“Oh no,” Kincaid says, patting the hand that rests on his forearm. “I have more to show you.”

He leaves me with promises of answers tonight, but little else.

*

“It’s an old film about the Cypress Project. Kincaid hopes it will enlighten you,” Dante says. His tone is formal as he leads us into a room with a large white screen at one end. I’ve been avoiding him since the day in the garden, but even though a few days have passed, none of the tension hanging like a cloud between us has dissipated. I wonder if Jost and Erik can sense it.

The walls of the theater are papered in crimson brocade, and the exaggerated figures of women bear torches overhead, glowing gold in the dim room. The carpets here are so plush they look like velvet and the row of armchair-like seats is equally divine. It’s nothing like the spare white room where we watched vids at the Coventry.

The Cypress Project. Greta spoke of it in the Old Curiosity Shop, and Kincaid mentioned it earlier today. He was following through on the answers he promised me. “The Cypress Project is Arras? Is that why our capital is named Cypress?” I say.

“I suppose,” he murmurs. “It would certainly be a reminder of their cleverness.”

“But they didn’t want anyone to know about Earth,” I say.

“Not subsequent generations, but the original population of Arras was quite proud of their achievement.”

“A film is like a vid?” I ask, pointing to the screen.

“Yes.” Dante excuses himself, obviously eager to get away from me. I’m not sorry to see him go. The awkwardness between us is getting harder to hide, and I still haven’t told the others about Dante’s claim.

We take seats and wait for the film to start. Kincaid enters but he doesn’t sit with us; instead he chooses a small sofa placed to the side of the room. Only Valery sits with him. He nods to me, and I turn away, embarrassed to be caught staring at him.

Blurring light streams past me and life bursts onto the screen. The images are in black-and-white and they crackle although there’s no sound. Dante returns and sits next to me. I focus on the screen, feeling Jost’s arm drape around my shoulders.

Tanks roll through cities. Soldiers march in proud lines. Women wave from windows. A man with a smudge of a mustache screams from a

podium. Planes drop bombs overhead. Then a man with a shock of white hair appears, speaking directly to the camera. I can't hear what he's saying, but he looks congenial and important.

"Who is that?" I ask Dante.

"The scientist who discovered the strands," he whispers.

I suddenly realize that the great scientist Loricel first told me about—the one whose name was long since forgotten by Arras—is the same man Kincaid told me bore the name of the mark on my wrist: Kairos. He moves across the screen, and the camera follows to zoom in on a small machine comprised of whirring gears.

"A loom," I breathe.

The scientist demonstrates the loom for a group of men. I glance in the direction of Kincaid, who was once an official in Arras, then jerk my eyes back to the screen. Kincaid is watching us as we watch the film, and now I feel his eyes on me.

The film shifts to footage of girls waiting in line to be weighed, to have their eyes checked, and their hands measured. Many smile and wave to the camera. One curls her arm up and stares out fiercely before dissolving into laughter.

"Are those …" Jost's voice is full of surprise.

"The original Eligibles," Dante finishes. I forget the tension between us, too wrapped up in the film. "We have to assume from the film that they are. I truly wish we had the sound so we could hear what they're telling us. Most of the other records have been destroyed. The Guild has worked very hard at ensuring confidentiality regarding the Cypress Project."

But it's obvious to me what's going on, especially as the screen flashes lists of items approved for transport followed by written guidelines for safe addition and eligible participants.

"Wait," I say as something slowly dawns on me. "Those eligibility requirements weren't for Spinsters."

"No, families and individuals had to prove their health and value to earn a spot in Arras's weave."

"And those that didn't?" I ask.

"You've seen the evidence," Dante responds. "Not everyone on Earth migrated to Arras, but they didn't die out either as the Guild had hoped.

Those who were left behind adapted to the changing surface conditions. The war ended quickly. Hitler, the man who started it, had no one to fight, and there were bigger problems to grapple with here."

"They picked who got to come along." The unfairness of it grates against my sense of justice.

"They assumed the war would destroy the rest. The few records that have stood the test of time indicate that the war lasted for several more years, stretching out almost an entire decade. The Icebox was less affected as most of the fighting continued in what was known as Europe," he says.

"Was known as Europe?"

"We have enough information to conclude that most of it is gone now. A large portion of Arras's population came from Europe as many of the Allied troops hailed from there. The rest imploded after they left. And of course, many died during squelched riots. The survivors were driven into the Icebox." Dante keeps his eyes on the screen while he tells me this. He relates it like a newsman on the Stream.

We watch the few remaining images flit across the screen. The program ends with a happy family—two parents, a daughter, and a son—beaming out at the audience. I wonder who they were. And whether they thought this would consign them to immortality, and how they would feel to see the theater sitting in a ruined world. An empty, forgotten Earth.

As the last image vanishes, the lights in the theater come up. I blink against the brightness. Kincaid stands and politely claps.

"I hope you found that informative." There's something weary in his voice, a heaviness that doesn't suit, and I realize the film has moved Kincaid to tears. He's touched by something that happened hundreds of years ago.

"I think it raises more questions than it answers," I say. I bow my head a bit in an attempt to hide the surprise I can't quite wipe from my face.

"It's the story of how our worlds came to be." Kincaid spreads his hands. "You cannot expect one film to explain everything."

TWELVE

DANTE FOLLOWS ME OUT OF THE THEATER, but Jost keeps a protective arm around my shoulder. I know I can't avoid Dante forever, and now that I've seen the film, I shrug off Jost's arm and kiss him swiftly on the cheek. He doesn't like it, but he gives Dante a terse nod and leaves us, heading back into the main house while Dante and I tarry on the stone path. The lights have dimmed to near twilight, but I can see the outlines of the wild plants and hear the trickle of the nearest fountain.

"Have you told anyone about us?" Dante asks me.

I shake my head. "I wouldn't know what to say."

"I can barely believe it myself," Dante says.

"But you suspected it. Why?"

"You said your last name was Lewys and, well, because of your mother," he says.

"You know her?" I ask.

"Of course, she's your mother."

I'm having a difficult time composing sentences, and thoughts, for that matter. It doesn't make sense. It's not possible. "So you *knew* her."

"Yes," Dante confirms.

"But Benn Lewys was my father," I say, trying hard to sort this in my mind.

"Benn was my brother," Dante says.

"He didn't have a brother," I say.

"No, his brother left." Dante blinks several times as if resetting himself. "I left, because the Guild was coming after me."

It doesn't explain anything, especially not his claims about his past—our past—or how he wound up on Earth. Still, my mother hinted at this, so I concentrate.

"But," I say, struggling, "you aren't old enough to be my father."

"About that," he says, scratching his temple.

"Yes?" I prompt.

"Things are different here."

“Do you have time machines?” I ask sarcastically.

“We don’t need them. Time doesn’t flow rapidly on Earth like it does where we came from. Arras is a construct, so its time is not bound to the same physical laws that time on Earth is. For every month that passes on Earth, a year passes in Arras. So if you’re sixteen years old—”

“It’s only been sixteen months since you left,” I say. If he’s right, then half a year has passed on Arras since we left. It will be spring again, and Amie will graduate primary academy soon.

“I feel like I’ve barely been away, but here you are. I didn’t know,” Dante says. “I wouldn’t have left Meria if I had known she was pregnant.”

He wants me to understand. He wants forgiveness.

“It doesn’t matter,” I say. My words are glass, smooth and cold, and I know he can see right through them. “You still left her.”

You left me, I add silently.

“You don’t understand. *Meria* refused to come with me,” Dante explains. “She didn’t want to run. I showed her the mark of Kairos so she could come if she changed her mind.”

“Why does this matter?” I ask, gesturing to the techprint—a symbol that’s lost its original meaning to me. Now it’s another secret—another lie.

“Credentials,” he says. “It’s not just the mark, but also the information the techprint contains. Most refugees and dissenters hide theirs along their hairline.”

That’s why the girl checked our necks, but because my father had burned mine into my wrist she almost didn’t see it. “Why is mine here?”

“Priority access,” Dante says in a grim voice. “If you’d made it out that night, our channels would have rushed your clearance. Kincaid’s men in Arras verify information, but the placement of your tech print would have granted you priority passage through a loophole.”

“A loophole?” I ask.

“It’s an exit from Arras. It’s how most refugees make it to Earth.

“I told Meria all of this. If she had left …” He pauses, and searches my face as though he wants to tell me something, but he changes the topic instead. “You can’t imagine what it was like. A girl with fiery hair walks into my life with that mark, and you’re so like her, but—”

“My father marked me, not my mother,” I interrupt.

Betrayal flits across Dante’s face. His voice is raw when he speaks. “She must have told him about it.”

He’s hurt that she revealed his secret to her husband. His brother. “Yes,” I say, “because she loved him. Because he was a good man.”

“I never said differently.” But his body is saying it now. Every expression, every gesture, every pause is wounded. But then his posture changes, shrinking down before me. In my short time at the estate, Dante has never seemed vulnerable.

“I knew you the second I saw you,” he says. “I couldn’t explain it, even to myself.”

“That’s why you invited us back to the safe house,” I say.

“At first I thought you were Meria, altered a little, toying with me.”

“Mom wouldn’t do that,” I say defensively.

“The spitfire I knew would have, but I figured out pretty quickly you weren’t her,” Dante says.

“When you saw me kissing Jost.”

“I wouldn’t have put that past Meria, but no, I knew it wasn’t her. It was obvious you didn’t know me, but when you showed me that techprint and started telling your story—”

“You realized—”

“No, I don’t think I understood anything until I scanned the techprint,” he admits, “and even then, I wanted to deny it. But from the moment I saw you, you were as familiar to me as air in my lungs. I didn’t know why.”

“That sounds about right,” I say. I’d spent my entire first meeting with Dante trying to determine why he seemed so familiar, but how can you know someone you’ve never met? I can see my father—I can see Benn—in him now. Both are fair with dark features. Dante a younger version of the man I knew. “You had no idea about me?”

“No,” he says.

“But then how do you know you’re my father? If my mom married your brother—”

“It says so here,” he says, touching the print on my wrist.

“They never told me,” I say. The deception twists hard in my chest. Did it make Benn any less my father if he wasn’t biologically related to

me? Does it matter that he never told me?

“They were protecting you,” he says. “The only way to protect my family was to run. If the Guild knew I had fathered you, they never would have let you be born.”

“Because you weren’t married to my mother,” I guess.

To my surprise this makes him laugh. “No matter what their politics are, no one in the Guild is that morally rigid. No, it would have been because they thought you would be too dangerous. I think you proved them right.”

“But why?”

“A child with your genetics can’t be controlled.”

“My genetics? How would they even know my genetics?”

Dante hesitates and his eyes grow distant, reflecting only the rippling water of the fountain. “They know everyone’s genetics. They knew your mother’s and they knew mine. That’s why they wouldn’t let me marry her. You’ve been in the Coventry. You know women need permission to give birth in Arras, but anyone can get pregnant,” he reminds me.

“But what do they do if they don’t get permission?” I ask.

“Earth isn’t the only world with a grey market. There are secrets in Arras, Adelice, but they’re bought at a cost.”

“Then why didn’t you stay? If there was somewhere to hide—if you loved my mother?” I ask.

“It was too late. If I’d left earlier, I could have set up in the grey market, but we didn’t know anything was wrong until my marriage request was denied. We knew then that whatever was in my file meant I couldn’t stay in Arras.”

He had been going to marry her. The Guild hadn’t merely denied my mother’s request to have more children or placed my parents in menial jobs, the Guild had dictated the course of their lives with one simple denial. One that colored how my parents perceived each demand of their government thereafter.

“But why would the Guild want you?” I ask.

“Like I said, I have my secrets.” He runs a hand through his hair, evading my question. “Did your family have the radio? The books?”

I nod a yes.

“And the stories of Earth?”

I shake my head slowly. “Loricel, the Creweler at the Coventry, was the first person who told me about Earth. They must have forgotten.”

“Impossible. They chose not to tell you,” Dante says.

“So they knew, but why would they train me to fail at testing?” I demand. “They could have brought me here.”

“Meria had no desire to come to Earth,” he says in a cold voice, and I realize then that sixteen years in Arras may have given my mother time to move on and build a life, but Dante hasn’t had the same advantage. His scars are fresh. The damaged parts of him are still tender.

“This isn’t possible. Nothing you’ve told me makes sense. You can’t be my father, and Arras doesn’t run on an accelerated timeline.” Each of my words is louder than the last, as though volume can erase the information Dante has given me.

Dante pauses to consider this, and then he stands and walks to a fern lilting near the fountain. “Spinsters use a loom to see the fabric of the universe,” Dante says. “They work within the constructed weave of Arras.”

“Except Loricel, the Creweler,” I point out. “She could capture the threads without a loom. They even used her to help gather the raw source materials here.”

“That’s an entirely different level of skill,” Dante says, his forehead wrinkled in concentration. He’s trying to explain things and I’m interrupting him. “Very few *women* have that ability.”

The way he emphasizes *women* sends ice through my veins. Loricel alluded to this once, in her studio at the Coventry: *There are rumors of departments where men work with the weave, but the Guild always denies it.*

“It’s different for men,” he continues. “We don’t need looms, but we can only alter things that already exist.”

I can’t hold back the questions now. “*We*? You can weave?”

“I can alter,” he clarifies. “Same materials, different results. Spinsters can create, while Tailors can only alter what’s already present. I’m a Tailor.”

“That’s why you ran.” Loricel was right about the secret departments employing men, and they had wanted Dante to be part of it.

“You met some of us there, I’m sure. A medic who healed you or maybe an assistant of some sort,” he says. “They were Tailors.”

My encounter with the medic who healed my leg during my retrieval is hazy from the Valpron I was administered that night, but I can recall how easily Cormac had him ripped. Cormac did it as a reflex, like the man was the least important person in the world. If these men exist within Arras, the Guild has a very different way of handling them. “Why aren’t we told about this?”

“Alterations are a specific skill. If the public knew what Tailors could do to them—how we can manipulate a person’s body *and mind*—there’d be little point to our skills. A renewal patch is alteration on a very limited scale. It’s the closest the public comes to knowing what we do. We’re more useful if we operate in secret. *I* ran before the Guild could force me to become a Tailor for them.”

“They wanted you to be a Tailor?” I ask.

“Oh yes.”

“So you ran away from your family?”

“You ran, too,” Dante points out.

“That’s different. My parents forced me to run.”

“Why do you think they did that?” he asks.

“They lock Spinsters away.” I think of the doctor and nurses and the clinic where they were going to map and alter me. “The medics went home for the night. They had lives. Only the Spinsters were kept in a cage.”

“Did they invite you over for dinner?” Dante asks. “You don’t know anything about them. What they do to Tailors—it’s a fate much worse than being placed on the loom.”

Worse than false windows and constant surveillance? “I doubt it.”

“Tell me, Adelice, how many Tailors did you know before you came here?” Dante asks.

“That doesn’t prove anything,” I start.

“Had you ever even heard of Tailors before?”

“No,” I say in a quiet voice.

“Spinsters are locked up,” Dante says. “Tailors *disappear*. We are forced to exist on the periphery or to go along with the Guild’s schemes

and adopt fake lives and occupations, chosen by the Guild for whatever diabolical plot they've concocted."

"And since you wouldn't go along with that?"

"They would have killed my family," Dante continues. "When a Spinster is retrieved, everyone celebrates. When a Tailor is retrieved, he vanishes. And often his family does, too. No one can know Tailors officially exist because of what we do. Tailors can't create like Spinsters or Crewelers, but we can alter their creations."

"How?"

"Sometimes it requires special tools to adjust a person or a thing."

I'm reminded of the clinic at the Coventry, where I lay on a cold, steel slab as a dome of gears and wheels mapped my mind.

"Tailors can remove memories, adjust emotions, even undo things entirely."

"Undo?" I repeat in a whisper.

"Watch," he commands me, and as I do, his finger slips into the leaves of a fern near the door. At first it looks like he's massaging them, but then I see what he's doing. He's teasing apart the very strands that make them up. Most objects, even people, look like one thick thread on a loom, but I've seen them close enough to know that they are comprised of multiple thin threads twisted delicately together. Dante is pulling the fern apart. At first nothing happens, and then he tugs against a strand and it separates from the others. It's golden in his fingers and as he pulls it slips out from the other strands. The effect is instantaneous.

The fern's leaves wilt, withering into brown, drooping, then shriveling until they become so brittle that the plant crumbles into dust before my eyes. A moment ago it was alive and now it's nothing. It scatters like ash to the floor.

My eyes are wide as Dante releases the golden strands and they vanishe, evaporating like smoke when met with too much air.

"You ripped the time right out of it," I say breathlessly. "I never even realized threads had time strands."

"They aren't easy to see." Dante brushes his hands together as though they're dirty. "I unwound it."

"But why would time exist within a strand?" I ask.

“All things have a season, Adelice. You and I, we both have natural lives to live. We’ve been granted so much time and when that’s up …”

“We die,” I finish for him.

“If something doesn’t kill us first.” It’s an attempt at humor, but it falls flat. Probably since we both know that people like us aren’t likely to die of old age.

“If you can pull the time from a plant, then you can pull it from a person.” I shudder at the thought of seeing that.

“Yes.” Dante pauses and his jaw tenses under his smooth skin. “Or you can warp it. You can divorce it from the natural order of things to suit your purpose, which is exactly what the Guild has done.”

“Warp,” I repeat, and then it hits me. The *Bulletin* story we found with the photograph of Cormac. The propaganda film. I knew hundreds of years had passed in Arras, but no one could tell me exactly how many. Loricel was cagey about how long she had acted as Creweler. Cormac never seemed to age. At the academy we studied civic responsibility, not history, because Arras’s history never changed. It moved along pleasantly. It was orderly. Nothing in Arras progressed except technology.

Not even its leaders.

“How many years?” I ask, because I need to hear him say it, even though all the pieces are falling into place now, beginning to reveal a secret I could never have imagined. “How many years have passed on Earth since the Exodus to Arras?”

“Sixteen years, give or take. On Earth, it’s probably close to the year 1960, but we can only guess. It’s hard without days and seasons.”

I’ve never been good at math, but even I can figure that out. If sixteen years have passed on Earth, nearly two hundred years have passed on Arras. Generations in Arras have lived and died before those left on Earth have even forgotten the war.

It doesn’t make sense. It isn’t possible. “Are you telling me that Cormac Patton is over two hundred years old?”

Dante’s eyes shift to mine, and I see fire in them. “That’s exactly what I’m telling you.”

THIRTEEN

STEEL SNAKES AROUND MY WRISTS AND PINS me to the table. I struggle to see in the blinding light, and the smells of whiskey and renewal patches cause me to thrash against the cold metal. His Stream voice—the one that's both patronizing and charming—melts in my ear. It oozes into my consciousness as his form comes into view.

"Darling, why struggle? You can't stop this."

I slam my chest against his, but it doesn't help, and his breath stays hot on my ear. I feel Cormac's lips press down against my skin and my body bursts into flames, my bones cracking and shattering, my blood rushing into my hands and feet. I've lost the ability to fight him, and all I can do is scream.

I wake with a start. I can't escape Cormac any more than I can escape my dreams.

Cormac, who can't die, who never ages, who uses Arras-knows-what technology to maintain his youth eternally. With each minute that passes here, many more pass in Arras, giving Cormac time to build a plan of attack. He won't ever let me go because he has an endless amount of time to devote to finding me and destroying me.

In the Coventry, when I warped moments of privacy for Jost and me, I imagined lingering there, living an entire life safely away from my responsibility to the Guild. I never knew the Guild had done the same, creating a timeline that allowed them to move forward with unspeakable plots against those who rose up against them on Earth and in Arras. They'd corrupted the very strands of the universe.

Jost, Erik, and I breakfast in the sitting room of my suite the next morning. Through one door is my bedroom, and on the other side is the room they've given Jost. I thought the accommodations of the Coventry were luxurious, but these rooms border on lavish: heavy blue curtains line the walls and the intricately carved hearth looks to be hundreds of years old. I'm not sure I could even use it if I wanted to. Overhead, winged angels watch us from the painted ceiling. A valet brings coffee

and pastries on a silver cart, but my choice of topic causes us to leave the food untouched. I've kept this from Jost and Erik for far too long, waiting until I could grasp it myself, but they need to know what we're up against.

"So you're saying Cormac is over two hundred years old?" Erik says. "I thought he looked good for his age."

"Yeah, it seems like renewal patches are even better than we thought," I say.

"But how?" Jost asks. "How would no one notice that?"

"I think that's a question for Kincaid," I say. "He must know about this if he was a Guild official once. He was probably here at the beginning." The fact that Kincaid could also be two hundred years old sends bile rising in my throat.

"Are there more Tailors like Dante here?"

"I don't know, but there are Tailors in Arras. Dante claims the Guild retrieves them in Arras like they do Spinsters, but that all traces of the boys and their families disappear," I say.

"Makes sense," Erik says.

"How does that make sense?" Jost asks incredulously.

"Well, if I was trying to hide the fact that I was two hundred years old from everyone, I'd cover up how I did it, too. If they use the Tailors to cover up their conspiracy, they have to ensure no one knows the Tailors exist," Erik says, "and the Tailors have nowhere to go. They're dependent on the Guild, even more so than Spinsters."

"Unless they run," I say quietly.

"And then they're stuck here," Erik adds.

Earth isn't exactly a paradise, and the Guild has made sure it's even less possible every year to inhabit it, by stealing more and more of the planet's resources. What the Tailors do is monstrous, but deep down I feel sorry for them. I know what it's like to be caged, to feel like you have no options. The Guild systematically destroyed every option the Tailors had. How could they fight that?

"Dante said Tailors are everywhere in Arras. Medics. Guards. Doctors," I tell them. "Did either of you know about this?"

"I would have mentioned it," Jost says, and Erik gives an awkward laugh. At least they're trying with each other.

“But why would they cooperate?” I wonder.

“Why do Spinsters?” Erik asks. “Given the right incentive, anyone can be bought.”

“Not anyone,” Jost says.

There goes the friendliness.

“I haven’t told you the weirdest part yet,” I interrupt. Taking a deep breath, I reveal my true relationship to Dante.

Erik blinks and Jost frowns. They either didn’t hear me or they’re in shock.

“So your dad is nineteen?” Erik says.

I nod.

“And you never knew he was your real father?”

“Oh, do you mean I never knew my real father was my father’s brother, who left my mother pregnant and escaped to an alternate reality before I was born?” I ask in a scathing voice, hoping the cracks in my voice aren’t too noticeable.

“So you didn’t know,” Erik says.

“I went from being an orphan to having two living parents—”

“Sort of,” Erik interjects.

“Not helping, Erik.”

“He’s your father,” Jost says. The frown has slipped from his face, and he’s far away again.

“Yes,” I confirm.

“He missed everything,” Jost says in a voice so low I barely hear him.

“Sorry?”

“He’s been away your whole life,” Jost says.

“It’s okay. I didn’t know what I was missing,” I say. The second the words launch from my lips I want to take them back.

In my own confusion, I hadn’t even thought of how Jost would take this news. Jost is thinking about Sebrina. Each day we spend on Earth is weeks in Arras. Each second that passes, Jost’s daughter slips further from his fingers. She doesn’t know what she is missing either.

But he does.

“I’m going to digest breakfast,” Erik says, although he hasn’t eaten a bite. Nothing about his tone is casual. He must have picked up on what was going on long before I did. Proof, once again, that the brothers are

more attuned to each other than either would like to admit. He slips into the hall with a faint farewell, but I see his eyes turn back to his brother. He wants to comfort him, but he doesn't know how.

"I'm sorry, Jost," I say as the door shuts behind his brother.

"For what?" Jost asks, but there's an edge to his voice.

"It didn't occur to me," I admit. "I didn't think about Sebrina."

"It's not your responsibility to think about her," he says, but it's these words that reveal that the edge in his voice isn't anger, it's pain. I've hurt him. Not by reminding him of Sebrina or of how quickly he's losing her, but because I hadn't cared enough to think about it in the first place.

"I was so caught up in what Dante told me," I say, but the excuse sounds lame. "I didn't even think about Amie until now."

"Amie's a lot older," he reminds me.

"And very impressionable," I say, thinking back to how eager she was to be tested. How fascinated she was with the *Bulletins*, fawning over the Spinsters and their beautiful dresses. "She's in danger, too. Cormac knows about her and she's getting closer and closer to the age of Eligibility. We can't waste time here. We need a plan."

"Do you think Kincaid can help us?" Jost asks, and I can tell he doesn't think Kincaid can—or will.

"I think it's worth finding out," I say. "We need help. Resources."

Jost's head snaps back and he stares at me, his eyes on fire. What did I say?

"Sorry I couldn't provide for you," he says in a low rumble.

I'm caught off guard by his reaction. I stumble to find words that aren't angry or annoyed. "I didn't ask you to."

He doesn't respond.

"Is this some sort of male-ego thing?" I ask. "I'm not a damsel in distress. I don't need you to save me."

"Maybe I want to save you." He's practically growling now. He's not angry. It's something else. Something primal. Something I've never seen in Jost before, and I understand. He couldn't save Sebrina, but he wouldn't lose me.

"That's noble—"

"There's nothing noble about it," he says. His lips are on mine then and they crush so hard that I feel his teeth cut against the soft flesh of my

mouth. I'm torn between pushing him away and pulling him closer.

The latter wins out.

But I don't let him control the kiss. I push back harder as his arms circle my waist, pulling me roughly to him.

"Romantic," I murmur through our fighting lips.

"Wow. This is your idea of romantic?" he asks. His grip on me loosens and his hands drop from my back. "I need to work on this with you."

"That's exactly what I had in mind," I say, drawing him to me. I trace his shoulders, my fingers trailing along his chest until I bunch his shirt in my fists and force him to me. He doesn't resist. He wants the world to fade away, too. Even if it's only for a few minutes.

His mouth forces mine open, and my body reacts in interesting ways. First, there's the tingle in my fingers I always feel when we kiss, but it spreads out, gathering finally into throbbing energy. We break apart, panting, and then I push him back against the fireplace and kiss him again. His body presses into mine, and he flips me around so that now I'm gripping the stone mantel. The stone is cold, sending shivers rippling through me, but I don't care. His hands twist and grab my wrists, pinning them up over my head as his lips trace the hollow under my jaw.

"*This* is romantic," he says.

"I couldn't agree more," I murmur between his kisses.

We continue for a while, laughing and teasing and always kissing, but then he pulls back and his face grows distant. He's stopping us again.

He doesn't want you, the voice in my head mocks me. *You're not her. You aren't his perfect wife*.

No. I refuse to believe that. There are more important things than my insecurity right now.

"Jost." I call him back to me. He doesn't respond until I take his hand.

Tears pool in his eyes, and I feel the hot prickle of tears in my own.

"What are we going to do?" he asks.

"We're going to talk to Kincaid," I say firmly. "We can't make a move until we know how to get back to Arras. Kincaid will know how."

"How can we trust him?" Jost asks.

I understand his hesitation, even more so because we both have so much to lose if Kincaid betrays us. Kincaid was Guild once, but so were

we. And if the Guild has done anything nearly as terrible to him as they have to us, I can't blame him for abandoning them. I can't blame him for wanting to destroy them.

"We don't have a choice."

FOURTEEN

I LINGER IN THE GARDENS THAT AFTERNOON when the artificial lights are turned high enough to feel like the sun, replaying Jost's kiss in my mind. Even as a memory it pulls me apart, shattering me into a thousand glorious pieces that only he can put back together.

I feel eyes on me first, drawing me back to the present, and when I finally spot the man tucked behind a large statue, he saunters out. His smile is too wide, and as he approaches me, he bows. He's about my height, but his features mimic Valery's—a thick sweep of black hair and sloping, brown eyes. The lighting system fades as he gets closer to me, and I start to feel apprehension ripple through me.

"Scheduled maintenance," the stranger explains. "You must be our new guest."

"I'm sorry," I say, my eyes flickering to the doors that lead back into the main house. "I don't know everyone here yet."

"No, don't apologize," he says. "I'm Deniel."

"You're a Sunrunner?" I guess.

"Yes," he says. His finger traces the air. "But I'm also a refugee from the Eastern Sector. You're a refugee, too."

I swallow hard but nod, wanting to keep things friendly. I have no reason to feel so nervous. Kincaid's estate is impenetrable, but I've had little contact with any of the other Sunrunners. I curse the empty-headed romantic reverie that allowed me to let my guard down.

"I saw the Eastern Sector," I say, recalling my goodwill tour with Cormac.

"There is so much beauty there. No doubt the remains of the culture we brought from Earth." Deniel's voice is so low he practically purrs. He offers his arm, and I take it tentatively. Relief floods through me as he leads me back toward the house, and I relax. "I left there long ago."

"To come here?" I ask, trying to keep my voice even and pleasant.

"I worked the grey market in Arras until I was forced to come to Earth." He speaks into the distance, not bothering to look at me.

“You must have left a lot behind,” I offer.

“Yes, but I keep my past close. My *ojiisan* gave me a piece of ivory. It is very old,” he says quietly. “Your skin is smooth and pure like it. Would you like to see it?”

I agree, but keep my eyes on the doors we’re nearing, counting the seconds until I can excuse myself.

Deniel draws out a smooth, sculpted piece of ivory. He holds it so close to me that I can barely see it. It is flawless, I think, and then he presses it to my chin. As his thumb twitches I realize the ivory is actually a handle—a thin silver blade extends from it.

“Beautiful and deadly, like a woman,” he murmurs.

In an instant the blade is at my throat and Deniel forces me into the hall of the main house. My skin stings where the blade has slashed a shallow cut near the hollow of my neck. He presses his full weight against me and breathes hot and fast against my ear. I expect him to push me down to the floor, but instead the panel I’m crushed against trembles and rotates back. He drops the knife from my throat as he shoves me through the hidden door.

The room is out of place at the estate, lacking the opulence of the other chambers. It’s spare with cinder-block walls and a long, slick table. I fight the panic spreading through my limbs. It threatens to lock me down and make me an easy target. I turn to see the dark concentration in Deniel’s eyes. The room reminds me of a clinic, like the one where I was mapped in Arras. A realization that does nothing to stem my panic.

“I don’t like dangerous women,” he breathes, lingering in the doorway.

“Am I dangerous?” I ask, locking my gaze on his.

“You won’t be for long,” he says, edging toward me. His eyes bore into me, studying my face and then my body. It makes me want to hug myself protectively, but I stay still, waiting for the right moment.

Deniel inches closer, clutching his knife between us, moving me backward into the room.

“You wouldn’t be stupid enough to fight,” Deniel spits, saliva peppering my ear. There’s a note of amusement in his voice. “Do you think the Guild will let you go?”

The frozen part of me melts at his words. Clearly he doesn't know me very well.

The blade presses into my throat again and his hand moves to my shoulder. He's left the panel ajar. I only have to get there and then I'll be back in the corridor. I feel the tug as his fingers dig into me. But he's not merely scratching me, he's ripping me open, tearing into my strands. His touch burns across my shoulder, blazing onto my neck.

The strands of the room come into focus—brilliant and tempting—and as my eyes fly to Deniel's face, I realize I can see him and the shimmering threads that comprise him as he must see me now. His strands aren't bright and golden, they're tarnished brass and pulse with a near-crimson light. Without thinking, I claw at his shoulder, rending the tightly knit threads there, and the skin ruptures in the spot, blood spewing from the laceration. Deniel pulls back with a shriek of agony, clutching his wound. For a moment he looks like he may pounce again, but I raise my hands defensively, feeling his blood dripping down my long fingers. His shock and outrage mirror the raw anger I feel. His eyes slide to my fingers and the calculating look returns. Obviously he's estimating how much damage I can do to him before he can stop me. But rather than attack, he laughs, shaking his head, his knife still raised.

I scream as loudly as I can.

It startles him, but he jumps at me, lunging to cover my mouth and losing his knife in the process. I know he can do plenty of damage to me without it, so I kick him hard. It only makes him angrier. I'm reaching to tear at him again when a guard bursts into the room and tackles Deniel.

Erik rushes in behind him and pulls me up from the floor, ushering me away from the mayhem as more of Kincaid's men appear. The tears come then. They spill heavy and hot down my cheeks, washing the fear from my body and leaving me to tremble over what's happened.

I watch as Kincaid's men lead Deniel away to a fate worse than what he'd planned for me. I'm sure of that much.

"Are you okay?" Erik asks, taking my shoulder. When I don't respond, he pulls me into a hug and I let him. I count his heartbeats, trying to breathe in rhythm with him, but his heart is racing too fast to calm me.

He takes me to my room and pulls a dress from the wardrobe. I look down and realize mine is torn. It flaps at the shoulder, ripped in the attack. I reach for my zipper and start to pull off the damaged gown. As I do, Erik throws his hands over his eyes.

“Sorry,” he says, his voice muffled by his hand.

“Are you covering your eyes?” I ask in disbelief. The gesture surprises me.

“I’m being a gentleman,” he says, still looking away.

“That would be a real first,” I tell him as I slip the dress over my head.

“I guess I’m a changed man,” he teases.

“You can turn around now,” I say after I’m sure that I’m completely covered.

When he does I can’t help but notice that his cheeks are a little pink.

“Zip me up?” I ask. My hands are still shaking too hard to manage the last bit of zipper on the back of the dress. I pull my hair up and Erik tugs at the slider in a slow, gentle motion, one hand on the small of my back.

“What’s going on?” Jost asks, coming into the room. I pull away from Erik and fall into Jost’s arms while his brother explains what’s happened. Jost’s eyes travel between our faces, growing darker until they flame with anger. He jerks away from me and heads down the hall, forcing Erik and me to follow after him.

“Where are you going?” I call, but he doesn’t respond so I sprint to keep up with him.

“I’m going to have a little chat with Kincaid about his men,” Jost says through gritted teeth.

“I don’t think that’s a very good idea,” I murmur. “We’re his guests __”

Jost cuts me off. “And one of his guests was attacked. He needs a lesson in hospitality.” He whirls to face us, but I can’t think of anything to say that will stop him now that he’s reached this point.

“You don’t think he’s going to do something about this on his own?” Erik points out. “I doubt Kincaid will be happy to hear this has happened.”

“I think Kincaid is the one who sent him,” Jost says.

“Why? What purpose would that serve?”

“Everything serves a purpose,” Jost responds. “We can’t trust him. Do I have to remind you that he was Guild? The only thing we can trust is that he knows how to lie.”

“Maybe we should get Dante,” I suggest in a quiet voice, trying to draw down the volume of Jost’s voice so we aren’t overheard.

Before we can talk Jost out of it, he’s bounded down the stairs to the main floor of the house. It doesn’t take long for us to hear the shrieking castigations coming from the assembly room.

“Yes, sir,” a guard says.

“This is poor form. What will my guests think?” Kincaid squeaks.

“He’s prepared to make amends for his … mistake,” the guard says.

“Oh, amends will be made,” Kincaid says.

For a moment we hang back, but something pushes me forward.

“Adelice,” Kincaid croons when I get close enough for him to see me. “I have been informed of what happened. In fact, I was about to send for you.”

“I’m sorry for interrupting. It was rude of me,” I say, “but I was hoping you had learned why he attacked me.”

“The boy is new, came in with a refugee group only a few weeks ago,” Kincaid says. “He had an introduction letter and everything. Standard protocol for someone who has come in through our contacts in Arras.”

“You should reconsider your contacts in Arras,” Jost says.

I put my hand on his arm as much to calm him as to warn him to be careful what he says to Kincaid.

“Deniel,” Kincaid says, “is going to be seriously punished.”

“That’s not necessary,” I say. “I’d like to know why he did it, but I don’t want him to be hurt.”

“I want him to be hurt,” Jost says. He’s come up beside me so quietly that even his low voice startles me. He places a hand on my upper arm to reassure me.

“You should listen to your friend,” Kincaid says. “It’s not sensible to allow a man like this to prowl around.”

“And”—comes a voice to my left—“it’s important everyone gets the same message.”

I turn to Dante and stare at him. “Which is?”

“You aren’t to be touched.”

I follow Dante’s gaze to see it burning into Kincaid. His words are fiercely protective, and it feels strange. It’s not something I welcome exactly. Jost might treat me like I’m breakable, but his actions are rooted in his loss of Rozenn, something I’m only beginning to understand. Dante barely knows me though. He can’t turn on fatherly emotions like that. I don’t want him to.

“I couldn’t agree more,” Kincaid says from behind me. His voice is low and even, not his usual airy, bouncing tone. “None of my guests are to be touched …”

“We can put him in the cells until—” the guard begins.

But Kincaid waves off the suggestion and gestures for him to be silent by raising his hand merely inches from his face. “I want Adelice to sleep tonight. How can she if definitive action isn’t taken now?”

“I’m fine,” I say, but I know I’ll ask Jost to stay the night. Then I’ll be able to sleep.

“Bring him into the gardens,” Kincaid says, ignoring my input. The guard nods and walks a few steps away to use his complant more quietly.

“And how do you plan to make her feel safe after this?” Dante asks Kincaid, coming into the hall’s light. He’s dressed in a thin tank-style shirt and soft flannel pajama bottoms. His shirt reveals a techprint on his biceps—three braided bands circling his arm.

“Don’t worry. You’ll be pleased,” Kincaid says.

“Your defenses were penetrated. This may not be the only threat. I’d like permission to investigate further.” Dante isn’t asking him.

Kincaid’s jaw twitches, but his mask of authority stays in place. “That won’t be necessary. I assure you that your daughter is my priority. Remember that.”

My eyes fly to Dante. How could he have told Kincaid? Dante claimed it would be a secret until I decided I wanted to share the information, if that day ever came. But Dante looks confused. He has no more idea how Kincaid found out than I do. I consider how quickly security responded to my screams when Deniel attacked me. They couldn’t have heard me unless they were watching me.

Which means it isn’t Dante’s fault that our secret is out. It’s mine.

FIFTEEN

SOMEONE LAYS A THICK FUR COAT OVER my shoulders after Kincaid announces that the punishment will transpire in the garden. I turn, expecting to see Jost behind me, but it's Jax. I haven't seen him since our first day here. He doesn't speak now, but he gives me a resolved nod as he slips to the back of the security team that's amassing for Kincaid's verdict. With the lighting system dimmed, the chill outdoors is reminiscent of the Icebox, without the lurking, shifting shadows. There's no need for me to watch the corners and hidden spaces around the plants and fountain; the monster is in plain sight now, no longer able to hide.

Deniel is dragged across the uneven masonry of the brick path, his knees scraping against the rough surface, but he doesn't speak or cry out. He keeps his head low, his ink-black hair falling over his eyes. When the guards bring him to Kincaid's feet, they drop him there and one nudges Deniel's head up with his knee. I gasp at the sight of the man's bloodied mouth and crooked nose. It looks like the guards have already put him through some significant punishment before they brought him to Kincaid.

"Who do you work for?" Kincaid asks in a singsongy voice. The amusement in it isn't lost on me.

Kincaid is enjoying this.

Deniel doesn't respond to the question. Instead he lolls forward again, his head drooping to his chest. Kincaid snaps his fingers and one of the guards bends forward, taking Deniel's chin forcefully into his hand and jerking it up.

"I'm waiting."

"No one." Deniel's answer oozes slowly from him, and I notice how swollen his cheekbone is. It balloons out, swallowing the space around his eye and forcing it shut.

"Let's try that again," Kincaid says.

I barely make out the guard's fingers tightening, but Deniel strains against the force, clawing at the hand that holds him.

“You could have had a fine life here, son,” Kincaid tells him. “The Guild forced you to run because of your ability, but while the Guild abuses Tailors, I value them. I would have valued you.”

Apparently the time for secrecy has passed. Dante isn’t the only Tailor on the estate. It seems Kincaid collects them.

Deniel tries to splutter something against the guard’s hand, but Kincaid continues. “The time for excuses has passed. You have betrayed my trust.”

“What’s going on?” Valery says, her voice elevated a decibel sharper than normal. She flies into the courtyard, her silk dressing robe rippling behind her. It’s loosely bound by a sash at her waist, and it does little to hide her flawless lithe figure, which does a lot to distract Kincaid.

“Darling, go back to bed. I’ll join you soon,” Kincaid assures her.

“I can’t sleep,” she says, crossing her arms against her chest. “What are you doing to Deniel?”

“Deniel attacked Adelice.”

I can’t help wondering why Valery even cares, but she swoops down to Deniel and stares him in the eye. How does she know him? If he’s new here, as Kincaid said earlier, I can’t imagine their paths crossing. I’ve rarely seen Valery out of her chambers except for dinners. Now she lingers before Deniel as if she’s trying to tell him something, but then her words come freely, in front of us.

“This is how you repay my kindness.” Accusation drips like poison from her words.

Deniel hesitates, still staring Valery in the eye. “We have our parts to play.”

Valery doesn’t respond. She rises up and turns to Kincaid. “I assure you I had no idea he was a traitor when I brought him here.”

“You know him?” The question sputters from my lips before I can stop it.

Valery winces, but taking a deep breath, she turns to me. “He was a refugee. We met fleeing Arras, and I helped secure his place here. I made a mistake.”

Mistake hardly seems to cover it. If Deniel fled Arras at the same time as Valery, he was sent here for some purpose and I have the scratches on my shoulder to prove it. She led him straight to his prize without

hesitation. Without thought. But my ire softens when I meet her eyes. Valery helped him because that's who she is—even if her graciousness no longer extends to me.

"You were trying to help him, darling," Kincaid says, placing an arm around her waist and pulling her close. "It was a lapse in judgment. Now go to bed."

He kisses her full on the lips, and I see it: whereas Valery melts and simpers into Kincaid's arms during dining times, she's stiff during this act. Unyielding. She doesn't want his attention. Not now.

And still she goes to his bed, with the slightest glance at Deniel as she passes.

"Hold on," Kincaid says. He gestures for Dante to come over, which he does reluctantly. "Will you do the honors?"

Dante's eyes flicker to mine, and I know that whatever punishment Kincaid has in mind, I don't want to see it. Is it too late to excuse myself? Beside me Jost takes my arm and pulls me close to him. Dante's attention turns back to his boss and he shakes his head.

"I'm not playing your games, Kincaid."

"Games?" Kincaid echoes with a guffaw. "My interest in your daughter should please you."

Dante's shoulders stay set, his lips a firm line of refusal.

"No?" Kincaid asks, but he sounds indifferent. He wags a finger at a burly guard, who steps forward. "Show Adelice that we will protect her. Show her what I do to those who would betray her."

The guard nods, and Deniel is lifted to his feet. The guard's eyes stay on Deniel's chest, but Deniel remains passive and remote. Then he gives a loud groan as the guard's fingers reach toward him.

My pulse leaps, pounding against my veins, and as the guard reaches forward, Deniel's strands glimmer to life again.

I can see them so clearly now, more so than I did when he attacked me. His strands are thin, well worn, patched with newer strands. Some grafted in seamlessly and others barely attached. Whoever Deniel is, he's endured a fair amount of alteration. Who did this to him?

Through the center of his jumbled weave runs a slender golden strand. The last pure thread remaining within the man. Another set of strands moves within Deniel, pushing apart the threads and patches, making

straight for the man’s core. With a great wrench, the guard rends apart Deniel’s threads, below the tear that I gave him. For a moment my concentration is broken and I can only see the crimson that drips thin across the guard’s hands, but then the golden strand pulls slowly from Deniel and he starts to melt away. I am fastened to the sight, unable to turn my head.

First, Deniel’s skin shrivels. The blood stops flowing from his chest until only a seeping puddle remains on his shirt. His eyes sink into his skull and his head lolls back, and I know he’s dead, but it isn’t over. The golden strand pulls cleanly from him, and the shriveled skin cracks and falls away. Deniel’s bones follow, until the only thing that remains is a pile of dust at the feet of the guards.

Kincaid steps forward, surveying the guard’s work. His face is grim, but there’s a gleam in his eyes he can’t quite hide. And then, without a smile, he says quietly, “Dust to dust.”

SIXTEEN

THE NEXT MORNING, A KNOCK ON THE door to my quarters startles me. I've been sitting at the desk, absently brushing my hair. When I open the door, a younger valet is waiting with a silver tray perched on his fingers. A small ivory card with my name penned in elegant writing rests on it. I take the card and nod a thank-you to the valet.

"My instructions are to wait for your response, miss," he says in a clipped tone.

"Okay, give me a moment." I turn into my room, and after a moment's hesitation, shut the door. I can't stand the thought of him waiting there, watching me. I'm not fond of the idea of shutting the door in his face either, but, well, choices.

I unfold the card:

Adelice,

Please accept my sincere apologies for yesterday's unfortunate interlude. I want you to feel secure here, but I don't wish you to think ill of me. To relieve the tension from last evening, I've arranged a small play for you and your friends' amusement in the theater. I hope it will show you the positives of having Tailors available for our use. Please let me know if you are available for the presentation at three o'clock.

Most sincerely yours,
Kincaid

My eyes flick to the ticking clock on my nightstand. It's already noon. I scrawl my acceptance across the bottom, trying to sound enthusiastic and failing miserably.

I don’t want to go, but this isn’t so much an invitation as a summons. I traipse back to the door, nearly tripping over my dressing gown, and give the card to the valet, who does a good job of not looking too annoyed at having had the door shut in his face.

“Thank you,” I say, but he merely tilts his head in acknowledgment, pivots to the right, and moves down the hall.

I’ve barely shut the door when another knock forces me to open it again. On the other side I find Jost standing there with two large turquoise boxes. Another valet is walking hurriedly down the hall, carrying more of the same boxes. I raise an eyebrow at Jost.

“A gift from our amiable host,” Jost says, nodding to be let in.

“I see you’ve been invited to the show then,” I say.

“And what a show it will be,” Jost mutters. He crosses to the bed and sets down the boxes. I walk over and lift the lid of the one with the tag addressed to me. Inside I find a cloud of pink tissue paper. I push it open and pull a silk gown from the box. It’s a lovely pale pink and the fabric swims down my body when I hold it up. The d&emacr$colletage is a sunburst of crystal. I turn it over and study the draping back, finding another sunburst to decorate my derriere.

“Pretty,” Jost says. It’s as much enthusiasm as he can muster up for something as shallow as clothes.

“Let’s see what you got,” I say.

“Oh, I hope mine is purple and shows more skin,” he says with a wink.

“If you are going to be a smart-ass, I hope it does too.”

He lifts a pressed black suit jacket from the box. “No such luck.”

“You’ll look dapper,” I say.

“I’ll be uncomfortable.”

“I never knew you were so anti-tux,” I say.

“Tuxes are for men like Cormac.”

“And what’s for a man like you?” I ask, pulling the jacket from his hands and tossing it down on the bed.

“Careful, you’ll wrinkle that,” he starts, but as I latch my arms around his chest, he stops.

“How very conscientious of you,” I murmur as I move closer to him.

“What can I say? You know what a conscientious guy I am,” he says, but the words mute as my lips meet his.

“I think the dress is pretty. It will be beautiful when you’re in it,” he says, pulling away from me.

“Should I try it on?” I ask.

Jost hesitates for moment, his eyes growing serious.

“We’re alone here and we have hours to get dressed.”

He sinks back onto the bed and watches me with serious, widening eyes. For a moment, I feel shy, my bravado failing me, but my fingers grip the sash of my robe, and I hope he doesn’t see how they tremble as I begin to pull it open. His hand reaches up to grip mine, stopping the shaking, but also stopping me from opening the robe. For a second I expect he’s going to pull it open himself and I wonder what his hands will feel like there. Somewhere my mother’s voice calls to me, but it can’t compete with the roar of blood that floods through my body, igniting every inch of my skin.

“You don’t have to do this, Ad,” he whispers instead. His hand pulls mine away from the belt and we stare at each other for a long moment, and then I listen to my body and sink against him, my legs straddling his lap, my arms wrapping around his neck. His breath is hot against my collarbone and as he slides his fingers through my loose hair a shiver runs down my spine. He’s bringing his lips to mine when another knock interrupts us.

“What is it, annual knock-on-Adelice’s-door day?” I grumble.

Jost’s hands fall from me and he grins shyly and then casually pulls me up to my feet.

“Come on, Kincaid is probably inviting us to another wild party.”

“Can we be so lucky?” I ask.

But it’s not a valet waiting outside the door. It’s Valery. Her cosmetics are perfectly applied, less drastic than the first night we saw her here, but she still looks exotic with her wide, dark eyes and midnight hair. She’s wrapped in the same robe she wore last night, but it’s clear that she’s done up for this afternoon’s event.

“I thought I could get you ready,” she offers. Her eyes flash to Jost, who’s standing awkwardly by my bed.

Like old times, I think. I want to send her away. She might feel the need to hide under a painted mask when she's with Kincaid, but I've got more important things to do than getting primped for a charade of civility.

"That sounds nice," Jost answers for me. "I should get dressed. Check in on Erik."

Check in on Erik? Erik is the last person he'd want to see. He's trying to avoid where we were going a few moments ago. "Sure," I say. "Help him tie his bow tie. Curl each other's hair."

I don't try to hide the annoyance in my voice.

Jost smiles and shakes his head slightly as if to remind me to watch myself. "I'll see you later." He kisses my forehead at the door, then looks to Valery and back to me. "You two have fun."

Fun is probably the last thing we'll be having, but I give him a small smile.

Valery wastes no time once he's gone.

She rushes to my bed and lifts the silk dress from the heap I've left it in. Smoothing it out, she crosses to my closet and hangs it carefully on the closet door.

"Lovely," she says, surveying the gown. "You should wear your hair down. We'll put some waves in it."

I open my mouth to ask her why she's doing this, but then I shut it again. It's the friendliest Valery has been since we discovered her here. Perhaps she feels badly about what happened with Deniel. I can't exactly blame her for being cold to me after Enora's suicide.

But I can wonder what she's up to.

"It's good I came now. They don't have the kind of tools I had at the Coventry. This will take some time," she says.

I follow her into the bathroom and she urges me toward the sink. There's no fancy chair for me to sit in while she dampens my hair, so I bend awkwardly and she presses my head down under the flowing water. It's freezing and my body tenses.

"Sorry," she says absently, and I feel the water grow warmer. A moment later, her long fingers run through my hair, massaging shampoo into my scalp. It feels good for a moment but then her fingers grow more frenzied in their actions until she's practically scraping me with her

fingernails. I wince, and she repeats her apology. She lets the water rinse out the soap and it slides into my eyes. I squeeze them shut but feel the sting of the shampoo. She lifts my head and wraps a thick towel around me, offering me a washcloth to wipe my eyes.

When we return to my room, I sit at the vanity and she pulls the towel from my head. Water drips down my back, and my robe sticks to my skin from the moisture.

I feel a comb running through my hair and water gushes to my shoulders as she pulls it into a straight line.

"You should cut this," she says. "Less work."

"I like it long," I say. My mother's hair was long. My mother's hair *is* long, I correct myself, but I push the thought back out of my head, fighting against the helplessness I feel when I think of her. I don't want to imagine her roaming around her cage, deep in the cells under the estate.

"As you wish."

"You don't have to do this," I say. "I mean, I can get ready on my own."

"I'm sure you can, but Kincaid expects a certain level of aestheticism when it comes to his guests."

"I can put on cosmetics," I snap.

"Fine." She drops her hands and steps back from me. "I thought we could talk."

I soften a little at her words, feeling ungrateful and confused at the same time. "I'm sorry. I didn't want you to feel like you had to do this. You aren't my aesthetician anymore."

"I know that. I liked doing your cosmetics, Adelice," she says. "I'm not offering out of obligation."

"In that case, thank you," I say.

She retrieves long, thin pieces of fabric from her pocket. Her eyes meet mine and she pulls one taut between her hands, and for a moment I'm scared of the stranger I see reflected there. Who is this?

But then she takes a section of my hair and wraps it with precision around the fabric, tying it off at the end.

"Like I said, we don't have the same tools at our disposal here."

I swallow hard and nod. "Is that why you wear your cosmetics differently?"

“Kincaid likes the geisha aesthetic. It’s an old Earth style,” she responds in a quiet voice. “I often do my cosmetics to please him.”

But that’s not the only thing she does to please him. Still, today her face, while lined and painted, reflects the aesthetic of an Arras woman. I wonder if she’s trying to send him a message after last night’s spectacle, reminding Kincaid where she comes from.

She repeats the action until most of the hair framing my face is wrapped up into the rags. She faces me and leans in, taking my chin in her hands and studying me. Her breath smells of cinnamon.

Even here, after everything that’s happened, Valery is the essence of poise. Her skin silky, everything about her soft. Her fingers, though, are cold on my face and they pinch my skin as she turns my head to inspect me.

“How am I holding up?” I mutter through my nearly closed mouth.

“Well enough. A little cosmetics and no one will see the damage.”

I frown. Damage?

“None of that,” she says in regard to my dubious expression. “It makes it worse.”

In fairness, I’ve been through a lot. I’m not exactly looking forward to another round of cosmetics, but if it gets Valery talking, it will be worth it.

She reaches for the bag she brought and pulls out a cream, which she smooths over my face. Her brushes dance over my cheekbones, glide against my eyelids, and line my lips. For a moment, I close my eyes and imagine I’m in my quarters at the Coventry. Enora will meet me to take me to training or a meeting or a carefully prepared feast. This will have been a dream—or will it have been a nightmare?

I’m not sure.

“Open your eyes,” Valery commands. I do so, and she brushes a mascara wand roughly through my lashes. I catch a glimpse of her in the mirror. She’s concentrating, which makes her look like she used to—engaged in her work. She did truly enjoy it. She hadn’t been lying about that. Her robe has fallen off her shoulder and there I spy it—a thick purple mark running across her olive skin. It creeps toward her neck, but doesn’t quite reach it. A lavender scar. Her eyes catch mine staring in the mirror, and she tugs the robe back up.

“Let’s get that dress on,” she suggests.

I stand and let my dressing gown fall to the floor in a puddle.

“You should be more careful.” Valery clucks under her breath.

My eyes follow hers and I see a patch of blue blooming on my calf.

“Probably from Deniel’s attack,” I say, shrugging it off.

“There are plenty of things to hurt yourself on here,” Valery says, but her words are colored with warning. She draws my gown into her hands and waits.

I’ve worn enough of these dresses to know only one thing works under them. Nothing. She drops the dress over my head and I let the straps fall over my hands. It slides gracefully into place.

“Lovely,” she says.

“We didn’t talk much,” I say.

Valery pauses and pain flashes across her face. “I know.”

“You didn’t want to,” I accuse lightly.

“No, I didn’t.”

I start to ask her why, but she steps to the side and pulls the rags from my hair, which bounces down into soft curls that fall across my shoulders. I watch her in the mirror. She came because she wanted to do this. She wanted her old life, if only for a moment. She tugs one side of my hair up with a sparkling comb and stops to look at our reflection. I can’t bring myself to smile, but Valery positively glows. We look glamorous and polished. We look like ghosts from Arras.

“Beautiful,” she says with pride in her voice. She places her hand on my shoulder and I’m transported back to another time. Another world. My imagination sketches in Enora where she would have stood in the Coventry.

“Do you miss her?” I whisper.

Her hand falls and her expression changes. She steps away from me, still meeting my eyes in the mirror.

“I don’t want to talk about her with you.”

“So what? You’ve replaced her? With Kincaid?” I challenge.

“I never want to hear you mention Enora again,” Valery snaps. “She’s dead, and you have no right to even think of her.”

“Someone has to,” I accuse. “She tried to help me. She knew what was going to happen to her, that’s why she gave me that digifile.”

“And what did that cost her?” Valery asks. “Helping you, getting you that digifile. Enora trusted too many people, and it destroyed her.”

Enora had revealed her concern, showing her hand by giving me that digifile. Had the person who helped her get it betrayed her to the Guild? It doesn’t matter, because I understand why she did it. “She led me to the truth even after her death, and you don’t care.”

“Caring won’t bring her back. It will only bring us pain,” she warns.

“I dream of her—of how I found her. I’ll never stop thinking of Enora,” I say in a determined voice. Valery might dismiss Enora’s memory, but I won’t.

“Don’t worry,” Valery says in a sharp tone. “After a while you’ll stop dreaming.”

But dreams are the least of my concerns. After she leaves, only one thing consumes me: the lilac scar licking up her shoulder. She’s hiding it, and I have a suspicion I know why.

Valery has been altered.

SEVENTEEN

THE CURTAINS RISE AT THE BELLOW OF a trumpet. Three men appear, pointing and crying out as a specter rises in the distance. The ghost's voice booms out over the theater. I melt into my plush seat, consumed by the action. My heart pounds as the ghost cries for revenge against his murderer.

"Here," Valery says, pushing a booklet into my lap.

I don't want to look away from the action, but I flip through the pages to please her. More than ever, I want to make amends with Valery. It's a program, featuring images of the actors in the play. "Before" and "after" shots. Each actor been made uplas someone else, with a note on which famous film star he or she is portraying. The actors aren't only playing roles in Shakespeare's play, they've been made to look like actors from the past. The surreality of it isn't lost on me.

I peer at one of the actress's images as the scene changes. It's dark but I'm struck by the subtle changes that have been made, enabling her to look more like a classic film star named Veronica Lake, according to the program. Her hair is longer, waving over her face. Her nose more pert. Lips more full. The differences are pronounced—perhaps too much so to be achieved by a powder brush and eyeliner.

As the next scene begins, Kincaid appears onstage. He sports a trim beard and a black mourning ensemble but the hint of a smile betrays the somber moment. As the ghost's request for retribution is repeated along with the truth about his murder, my throat swells.

One of the actors clutches his side, where a thin crimson ribbon pours from his ribs. His performance is haunting. Even from where I'm sitting, I see the pain reflected in his eyes. Ophelia goes mad, casting flowers, and I weep for her, the girl locked away and used by Hamlet and Horatio and the king. I weep over Hamlet's confrontation with his mother.

Kincaid's age is the only thing that distracts me. He's too commanding. Too self-assured to play Hamlet. He doesn't understand his character's dilemma.

I could do better.

Only Valery seems as moved as I am by the performance, which surprises me. Jost and Erik sit up straighter during the final climactic scene, and we watch, waiting to see who lives. No one breathes until the final line has been spoken.

“That was beautiful,” I murmur.

“Were we watching the same performance?” Valery asks hollowly, but before I can ask what she means, she excuses herself.

“It’s late,” Jost says beside me. “Are you hungry? It’s well past supper time.”

I start to nod, but then shake my head. “I’ll join you after I freshen up.”

I’m surprised when he turns to Erik and they begin discussing the play. As I exit, their conversation grows louder.

Valery lingers near the stage door, peering through. Her shoulders are hunched close to her craning neck, and I’m struck by the overwhelming need to know what she’s doing. I creep up next to her, but the oak floor groans beneath my feet, giving me away.

She spins, her fingers splayed against the slope of her collarbone.

“What are you doing?” she demands.

“I could ask you the same thing,” I say, but she shushes me.

“I was looking for a friend,” Valery says, her eyes darting to the ground as she speaks.

She’s lying, but why?

“You could try going in,” I say, reaching to push open the door.

Valery shifts to block me. “I’m not playing a game with you, Adelice.”

“Then stop pretending that you aren’t up to something. Stop pretending we’re friends, and tell me who you are and what you’re doing.”

“I’m surviving,” Valery says, spitting the words at me. “No thanks to you, Adelice. Judge me all you want, but you might want to look in a mirror.”

She dashes away before I can recover from her stinging rebuke. She might be right about me, but that doesn’t mean she wasn’t lying. I slip

through the door instead of going to the powder room. Something drew Valery back here, and I'm going to find out what.

There are plenty of corners to hide in, shadows cast by pulleys and bits of the set. Here is where the spell of the play gives way to props and costumes. The story fades to flat, choreographed illusion. But it's not the wooden trees or the series of curtains separating the world of the stage from the audience that chills my blood. A woman rubs black-and-blue marks developing on her neck, and an actor dressed in a soldier's uniform moans on a table. Jax is there, attending to the actors. He spots me hiding among the shadows and gives me a quick smile. I try to smile back, but the scene before me is more horrifying than anything that occurred in the play.

The violence was realistic because it was *real*.

"What about my face?" the woman who played Ophelia asks. "Can you change it back?"

"I suppose," Jax says, examining the marks from where Kincaid nearly strangled her during the show. "If you want to go through the alterations again."

She winces at the suggestion. "I think … I think I do. I don't like looking like someone else."

"I'll let them know." Jax pats her arm and hands her a pack of ice for her bruises. He turns to me, but he closes his mouth as quickly as he opened it, turning hastily back to his work. Jax is the only other Sunrunner who's been friendly to us since our arrival. The rest keep their distance, but he seems interested in us.

I roll up the program filled with old film stars. These people are Kincaid's homage to the past—*his* past. Whatever he offers his actors must be substantial for them to endure so much pain. It can't be a simple process to have your entire face altered to look like someone else.

This is the benefit of Tailoring that Kincaid wanted to show me.

"Shame, shame," Kincaid's high voice says, startling me. "Spying on us, eh?"

I start to defend myself, but he continues before I can think of a good excuse for being back here.

"She was quite good," he says. He smears a rag across his forehead, wiping off some of his elaborate stage cosmetics. "Got a bit carried away.

I hate to leave marks on them, but it's part of the play."

"She wants her face back," I say.

"Pity, but the boys can fix her."

"How would they do that?" I ask. I try to keep my voice steady, hoping he doesn't hear the tremble in it that betrays my true feelings. If there is a way to reverse alterations, I could save my mother and help Amie remember. But maybe it's easier to change a face than to undo the kind of damage the Guild inflicts.

But Kincaid is still glowing from his great theatrical accomplishment and doesn't seem to notice. "'All the world's a stage,' Adelice," he says. "'And all the men and women merely players. They have their exits and their entrances; and one man in his time plays many parts.'"

"I'm not interested in being pseudo-intellectual," I say. "Can they fix her?"

Kincaid glowers, but his tone stays even as he answers. "They'll have her original measurements on file. It's a shame, considering how lovely she is as Veronica, but I did promise them they could be altered back. If she wants to continue in my employment, she'll get used to a bit of alteration for the good of the performance."

I force a small smile, but bile rises in my throat. I can't imagine being so far indebted to Kincaid.

As we watch, the stage crew emerges from the shadows, leading the injured actors away. I bite my lip to keep the accusations from tumbling out. When I turn back to Kincaid, anger blurs my vision, bringing his strands into harsh relief, as Deniel's had been when he attacked me. Kincaid's central time strand glimmers. It's not like the golden strand I witnessed being pulled from the young Tailor. It's tarnished with age, although there's a thin, bright fiber braided through the central portion. I blink, trying to dismiss the sight, unsure of what I'm seeing.

"Sir," Jax says, appearing beside us, "we've assessed the injuries and cleared most of the cast for release."

"Very well," Kincaid says. "There's an issue with the voltage drop near the pavilion. No one can get it to dim properly."

"Probably the variable resistor. I'll take a look at it and check the estate's grid for any faulty circuits," Jax says. He seems giddy at the possibility.

“Please do it quickly. We mustn’t keep the party guests waiting,” Kincaid says in a low voice.

“Are all the Sunrunners also Tailors?” I ask after Jax leaves.

“A very small portion of them are Tailors. Sunrunning takes up plenty of my workforce,” he answers, “but Jax is one of the few that’s gifted at both. He and your father.”

I can’t think of anything to say to that. I know so little about Dante.

“Do you have more questions?” Kincaid asks. “About the performance? I do hope you enjoyed it. We needed some revelry to erase that … unpleasant experience.”

He thinks I’m back here to see him, I realize. It doesn’t even occur to him that what he’s done has only increased my anxiety about the Tailors and men working on his estate. I have lots of questions, but Kincaid won’t answer them.

“No,” I say, weighing my response. It takes every ounce of energy I have to say what I say next. “I wanted to compliment you on your performance.”

Kincaid beams and claps me on the shoulder. “We’ll have more shows now that there is such a large audience.”

“What about intel? Looking for the Whorl?” I ask. It’s a question that’s been on my mind since yesterday. Deniel came to close to getting to me, which means the Guild knows I’m here. “Shouldn’t we be coming up with a plan to stop Cormac?”

It’s a stupid move bringing this up now, but I can’t push it out of my mind any longer.

“My men are looking,” he assures me. “When we have news on the Whorl, you will be informed and then we can move forward. No reason not to enjoy ourselves in the meantime though.”

“And once we find it?” I ask.

“It’s the key we’ll need to rid this world of Cormac.”

“And to rid Arras of him, too?” I prompt.

Kincaid waves me off. “Of course, sometimes I forget.”

Forget about what? I wonder. That Arras exists or that he vowed to separate the worlds? I can’t bear to ask him.

Kincaid shepherds me toward the dressing room, prattling on about the various plays he’ll put on for my delight, but as he does, I glimpse a

soldier lolling forward lifelessly. I hope he’s only unconscious.

*

Dinner is more like a festival. We dine at small tables in the main garden. Large solar lanterns strung overhead shine like small blue moons against the sparkling Interface.

I haven’t seen the Interface since we came here from the Icebox. The lighting system always masks it, creating the illusion of a real sky most of the time. But Jax has managed to dim the lights to near twilight, and now I can appreciate the Interface’s strange and terrible beauty as its rugged strands writhe above us.

There are toasts with champagne, and tiny bits of cheese passed on silver trays, but I’m heavy with thought.

“Are you okay?” Jost whispers at my side.

I turn on my best false smile—the one I perfected during my time at the Coventry. He doesn’t seem to notice, so while my face beams, my heart slips down.

Kincaid is surrounded by men and a few of the actors. None of the players bear wounds or bandages from the performance. The woman still wears Veronica’s face, but she smiles and laughs and hangs on the arms of a fellow actor. If they aren’t sad, why should I be? Kincaid took care of them. None of them seem to be in pain.

“We’ll do another,” Kincaid promises. “Perhaps *Titus*?”

A few of the men whoop in approval. Only the actress’s smile falters. The slip reveals her terror, but her mask is back on before anyone else notices. I hope she’ll leave, run away from the stage and Kincaid, but based on how well she plays her part now, I doubt she will. She’s acting again. It’s in her blood.

Valery is absent. I see Kincaid glance to his side a few times, but she’s not there. The play upset her enough that she risks Kincaid’s displeasure, or perhaps she knew he would be so wrapped up in his own ego that her absence would go unnoticed.

“You aren’t eating,” Jost says, pulling me toward a table laden with platters and plates.

“I’m not hungry,” I say. I loop my arm through his and press my face to his shoulder.

“You should eat,” he says.

The din of the party grows louder as a man demonstrates a dance. His hands flail out and he reaches for the actress. She spins gracefully into his arms.

I look at Kincaid. I imagine he’ll be bouncing in giddy beat with them, but instead he’s engaged in deep conversation with a guard. His fingers stroke his small false beard. He issues an order I can’t hear, and when he turns back to the spectacle, our eyes meet. He smiles, but his eyes stay hard, absent their usual sparkle. Unreadable.

Kincaid can act after all.

EIGHTEEN

I SLEEP SO HEAVILY THAT THE NEXT morning I have no memory of the prior night. When I look back at the time since Deniel's attack, it seems like a dream, even though I feel far from safe. Sleep is the dark and lovely escape of my childhood, and nightmares are now an inevitability of my waking existence. They'll come for me again and again, but in sleep, I'm finally free.

When I was little, I would lie awake and listen to my father checking the locks on our doors. The only thing I needed so I could drift away was the sound of locks clicking in place and if I heard them, I rarely had nightmares.

Once, soon after my parents starting training me to hide my gift, I dreamed I was tangled in a web, held captive by sticky strands that wound slowly around my short legs. They wrapped up my entire body until even my eyes were glued shut from the clinging fibers, and I waited to be devoured.

My father woke me that night, and I was still screaming even after he switched on the lamp that hung over my bed. Only cocooned in his strong arms did I calm down enough to relate the dream in choking, gasping sobs.

"You're safe," he whispered into my hair.

"But you weren't there," I sobbed.

He could have lied to me—told me he would never leave me—but instead he pulled away and took my trembling chin in his warm, rough hands. "When I'm not there, remember you have the strength to free yourself."

"But I didn't," I protested.

"You will," my father said, brushing back the wisps of copper hair caught in my tears.

I fell asleep in his arms and woke the next morning to find him sleeping in a crooked heap next to me. He'd stayed with me through the night. Looking back, it was almost as though he knew our time together

was drawing to a close, as though he couldn’t bear to deplete my strength before I would need it most.

Now sleep asks no more of me than it once did. It is a refuge for me like it was when I was a child—perhaps the last refuge I have left.

*

My father is the first person I think of when I wake—my real father. The man who brought me up and locked the doors at night to keep me safe. I only knew him as a parent—someone who cared for me, providing food, shelter, and security—but now I know there was more to Benn Lewys. In the Coventry, I blocked the memory of my retrieval night, letting it fade into a fuzzy, Valpron-tainted recollection. If I didn’t think of it, it had never happened. The fact that I would never see my father again could burn out of my mind along with the other moments too painful to recall.

But now, knowing that Dante is my biological father and that Benn kept his own painful secrets tucked away, I want to remember. And for the first time since my retrieval, I have a conduit to my past.

I find Dante piling large glass panels and coiled wire into the back of a crawler.

“Going somewhere?” I ask, suddenly glad that I’d pulled on thick blue jeans rather than a dress.

“Yeah,” Dante says, pushing another panel into the cargo bed. There’s the hesitation of a question in his voice. He knows I’m up to something.

“I want to come with you,” I say, twisting a loose strand of hair tightly around my finger. “Maybe I could learn the family business.”

Dante slams the cargo door closed and wipes his hands across his jeans. “Sunrunning is hardly the family business.”

“Still, I’d like to see it.” I’m not exactly lying. I would like to understand how Sunrunning works, but I’m more eager for some time off the estate with Dante.

“I don’t know. I was planning to go alone—”

“I don’t feel safe here anymore,” I say in a low whisper, confessing my weakness to my father as I would have as a child.

“Fine,” Dante agrees. Apparently he’s as vulnerable to my entreaties as my father once was. “I’m leaving in ten minutes. Meet me out here.”

I dash back in to grab a few supplies—a bottle for water and a jacket in case it's cool in the open-air crawler. Unfortunately, my quick supply run puts me in the path of Jost and Erik. I'm not eager to make a party of it, but I can't say no when they ask to come along. It means Jost and Erik can help Dante collect the solar panels after they're charged. Dante doesn't seem too happy about it, but he doesn't renege on his agreement to let me come.

"And you're sure this is safe?" I ask Dante, my attention locked on the crawler. It has the same terrifying, cage-like appearance of the one we traveled in to the estate with the added bonus of no roof.

"Perfectly," Dante says, balancing a thick glass panel on his shoulder. "Get in and stop worrying. I thought you were a rebel."

"I haven't quite hit the suicidal stage of rebellion though," I mutter.

"What every father wants to hear," Dante says. He looks away as soon as it slips from his mouth, but awkwardness crackles in the air between us. I can appreciate his attempt to lighten things between us, but I can't laugh about this yet.

"How far are we going?" I ask as the engine thunders to life.

"Until we see the sun," Dante says.

"We'll be outside Kincaid's territory?" I ask.

"Yes," Dante answers, not taking his eyes off the road that leads off the estate.

The ride is as rough as I predicted based on the appearance of the crawler, but when we get closer to the border, where Dante will gather the solar energy to sell in the Icebox, light creeps across the edge of the Interface. We've been past the border before—the night we came to Earth—but we hadn't stayed long enough to study the relationship of the worlds. Day never came once we'd passed under the Interface into the metro of the Icebox, only an artificial morning created by the solar charges in the street lamps. I had looked at the sky that day and it hasn't changed since. At the time I was sad to think I had left the moon and stars behind without so much as a goodbye. In a moment I will see blue laced with cottony clouds. I will see the sun.

And when I do, we'll be deep in Guild territory.

"But what is it the border of?" Erik asks as we cross into the bright light of morning. We're out from under the Interface now. Arras's cover

doesn’t reach this far along the rocky, mountainous shoreline.

“The Interface between Earth and Arras,” Dante says over the rumble of the crawler’s engine. That’s hardly more than we knew before though. The relationship of Earth and Arras remains hazy, although we see the parasitic effects of Arras every day. “There’s a Guild mining operation nearby.”

“Only one?” I ask.

“One active mine. Once they expend a spot, they move to another. We estimate there are about one hundred active mining locations at any time, but there are thousands of abandoned ones,” Dante says. “Arras always needs more. It’s growing every year.” His eyes flicker to the sky directly over us.

If Arras is up there, it’s hidden from view, even at the boundary of the Interface. Dante parks the crawler in a patch of grass, and I leap from it, kicking off my thin flats and stretching my toes in the cool blades. It tickles my skin and I’m reminded of home, of the grass woven into the yard I played in as a girl, and I have to fight the ache of longing that tumbles through me. Turning around, I look at the world the sun touches. There’s some vegetation although it’s sparse and unruly. I stare up, unblinking, into the bright sky, looking for an aeroship like the one we saw the first time we were here. But no ship comes and soon purple spots blossom in my vision. Dropping my gaze, I stare out to the other side and catche my breath—across the top of a far series of mountain peaks runs a long fence. Metal. Sharp. Modern. On the way here, Dante warned me one of the Guild’s mining operations was located nearby, and here’s the proof. I don’t want to know what lies beyond that fence.

Jost and Dante are busy checking equipment, ready to get started with the operation as Erik and I watch. They move with purpose, unloading thin panels from the small cargo space in the crawler.

“How does it work?” I ask.

“Basically, these collect the solar energy,” Dante says as he mounts a panel on a rack behind the vehicle.

“And that?” I point to a cord snaking its way from the rack to the back of the crawler.

Dante opens the cargo door wider and I spot a long, squat control board. “It monitors the intake of solar energy as well as the panel’s

temperature level with bypass diodes. Collection occurs in cycles so the panels don’t overheat and crack. We need to hook them up to a solar tracker to ensure the rack tilts them toward the sun. It takes hours to fully charge a panel.”

“So we’ll be here awhile,” Erik says, pivoting around to take in the entire view—how the raw weave blocks the sun, the Guild’s fence, the sparse vegetation. “Arras lies over it …”

I have to assume so, based on our escape from Arras, when I ripped an exit through to the mantle that we now see overhead.

Erik takes a few steps back, surveying the world around him. Then he leans down and touches the ground. A moment later his eyes rise to the border between the sun and the weave.

“Then this is where it begins,” he says softly.

At first I don’t follow, and then it hits me: everything Loricel told me and everything I’ve learned. Arras has to begin and end. And it does, I realize. At four distinct points. Dante called them resources, but I know them as something different—coventries. Four distinct coventries.

“It’s hard to fathom,” I whisper. “But it must be.”

We both start turning, looking for what we know must be nearby. If only I knew what it looked like.

“There!” Erik points to a spot in the distance.

“Come on,” I call, picking up my pace until I’m jogging toward it. If we have hours to kill before the panels are charged to capacity, we might as well look around.

“Whoa!” Dante calls, but we don’t listen.

In the distance, barely close enough to see, something rises up in a wind tunnel. Sparks fly off the twisting strands, and all around the building are large gears and tubes. My eyes follow the tubes back as they snake off. I know where they lead—to a Guild mining site. One of the ones Loricel had to visit each year. The ones I would have been responsible to maintain as Creweler. I pull back. Nothing good can come of going there. Even from a distance I can feel the frozen deadness of the area, the corrupted world around the drill site.

But I walk backward, staring at the strange cloud that rises farther and farther up into the sky until it covers the sun, and the dark, glittering strands that stretch out past it, covering the Earth. It’s separate from Earth

and separate from Arras, and around it strands radiate, knitting together into the Interface, as though it's creating the Interface's weave.

We've found a coventry.

"Is that …" Erik's voice trails into a question.

"A coventry," I guess. It rises like a tower, tubes and gears taking it above the surface of Earth. Due to the Interface, we can't see the actual compound where we once lived. The tower fades past the mantle like a castle nestled in the clouds. But I know it's there.

"How?" he asks.

I drop down to my knees and drag my finger along the ground, drawing a square. "Think of it this way. Arras has four coventries, right?" I don't wait for him to answer me. "They each rest on the border of the Endless Sea—or that's what we're told."

"But why is it here?" he asks, his eyes on the wind tunnel circling the tower.

"It's not really," I say. "It's up there, but that tunnel actually plumbs the elements of Earth and sends them up to Arras. Spinsters use them on the loom. We weave them into Arras, but we have to mine them from somewhere."

"So you take that"—he points to the twisting strands—"and make it into Arras."

"Yes," I say. "That's why we have to be in the coventries. To keep Arras bound together correctly."

"But if you're right about this," Erik says, "then the coventries aren't part of Arras. They're located in between Earth and Arras."

I follow his eyes up to stare at the snaking tunnel. We can't see the compound, but I know he must be right. Hadn't I always suspected everything about the Coventry was false? From the programmed windows carefully created to display a perfect setting to the strange walls in Loricel's studios that she'd overridden to use exactly as she wanted. The garden filled with creatures and plants that should never have been able to coexist. The constant need for security. The coventries were between Earth and Arras, and that's why we didn't fall to our deaths when I ripped us through Arras to Earth. We'd been close enough to the surface in the Coventry.

“That’s why we have to rebound in,” I tell him, recalling the small station situated right outside the compound walls. “It’s why they guard us so closely. They don’t want us to know where we are.”

Dante and stride Jost up in the middle of my explanation, looking angry and out of breath.

“Are you trying to get killed? Do you know how close we are to the mines?” Dante asks.

“I know,” I say.

Jost looks at my drawing in the dirt, and I repeat Erik’s and my conversation as his eyes search the sky. “But the Guild officials must know how this works.”

“Maybe,” Erik says. “The Guild is funny about what it does and doesn’t share, and there are enough ministers occupied with keeping their heads up their—”

“They aren’t worried about it,” I finish for him.

Erik grins. “Sure, sweetie.”

“Did Maela know?” I ask him, gesturing to the strange site. “Did she ever mention anything about the mines?”

“Perfect example,” he says. “I don’t know, but I doubt it. You see, Maela doesn’t care about anything unless it directly affects her. She doesn’t care what you are weaving or why. She does as she’s told and she takes any opportunity she can to advance.”

“So she’s indifferent?”

“It’s the preferred disease of Arras,” he says, and his smile becomes anything but amused.

“We shouldn’t stay here,” Jost says in a low voice. “They must keep guards near here.”

“He’s right. Not that there are usually refugees from Arras running around the base of the slubs to worry about,” Dante says.

“Slubs?” Erik asks.

“You’ll feel it,” he says. “The areas near the drill are dead. The Guild has mined all the resources and left an irregularity in space-time.”

Loricel told me Earth was frozen around the mines, and I could feel the coldness creeping over my skin as we moved closer to them.

“I want to see the mines now,” Erik says, and before we can respond to him, he’s heading in the direction of the tubes.

“Me too,” I vote.

Dante groans, but turns to follow him. “I knew why you wanted to come today, but I hoped you’d chicken out.”

“We’re too young and reckless to chicken out,” Erik calls back.

“He’s going to get us killed,” Jost growls, even as we follow him.

“Not if I get us killed first,” I say, trying to lighten the mood. He doesn’t laugh, so I take his hand and drag him after his brother.

We catch up with Erik, but no one speaks. There’s a sense of shared purpose in the silence, and we walk for so long that the sun shifts in the sky. First it moves high and glares over us and then it begins to dwindle down. We’re hours from the crawler and the solar equipment, but I won’t turn back until we see the mines. The area we’re exploring is outside the mountain range, and by the time we finally reach the steel fence, the sun hangs low. Not far from the fence, I spot a small creek a short way off. The rushing stream seems so vital after being under the Interface, where everything is inert, lifeless, or artificial.

“I’m going to fill up a few bottles,” Dante says. “Water near the source mines is pure, and we’ll need it for the hike back. Stay here until I return.”

“I’ll come with you,” Jost says. “No one should be alone.”

I open my mouth to protest, but he holds up his hand.

“Please, Ad. You’ll draw more attention if there are guards,” he whispers.

I’m itching to get to the mining site and I don’t want to waste time refilling water bottles but I bob my head in agreement.

“Stay with her until we get back?” Jost asks Erik.

Erik looks genuinely surprised by the request but a little pleased as well.

“You look as out of place as she does,” Jost continues, as if he can’t bear to actually be asking a favor of his brother.

“Sure,” Erik says, but now he doesn’t look happy.

Dante and Jost stride off toward the water, and I fidget as their outlines grow small on the horizon.

“Promise me that you won’t let me clock him,” Erik says through gritted teeth.

I can’t exactly blame him for being mad. I’m not very happy myself. “Promise.”

As soon as they’re far enough away, I start toward the fence.

Erik grabs my arm to stop me, but I drag him along. “They’ll be back in a few minutes,” he says.

“Dante is going to rush us out of here. I want to take a look around without him hovering over us,” I say. “Are you coming with me or waiting around?”

Erik follows me. Now that we’re so close, I feel pulled to the fence. It’s not what I would expect. It’s thick steel, and sturdy, but I don’t see any cameras or guards. It looks more like a boundary than a safety measure, which makes it easy to climb. As soon as I’m over it, I spot the mines. Erik holds a finger to his lips. Like I need him to tell me to be quiet. And then I see it.

A light moves not far from a nearby truck. It’s held by a worker. It looks like he’s escorting a group. I’m too curious to keep from taking a few steps forward to look more closely. The truck is parked near a grove of trees and it’s unlikely to be seen, but I understand the need for caution.

“Ad,” Erik says in a low voice. I hold up a hand, indicating I know what I’m doing.

The group continues, moving closer to the actual drills. For a moment my attention wanders to the mining spot. I’ve seen pictures of the drills, but I hadn’t come close to understanding their enormity. They are massive, even larger than the aeroship we saw when we first arrived. Since mine operations are shut down for the night, the gears don’t grind into the ground. Instead they sit ominous and dangerous in a cavernous hole in the world. Part of me wants to creep closer to see how far the abyss extends, but then movement catches my eye. The group stops at the perimeter of the site, and I see him.

Leave it to Cormac Patton to wear a suit into a labor camp.

“Is that …?” Erik whispers as he comes up beside me.

I nod. “Someone should explain occupational-appropriate attire to him.”

Erik chuckles lightly and tugs at my shoulder. It’s clear he wants me to step back farther away from the tree line. But I don’t need him to

protect me. I pull away and move a few steps forward. I expect him to go back to the fence, but he follows me.

“If he sees you,” Erik warns.

“He won’t.”

And I know I’m right—unless he’s looking for me. Cormac is paranoid enough to always be on alert, but he can’t expect us to be here in the belly of the Guild’s operations. It would be stupid of us to come so close to their operations after our escape.

The mining group is too far away for me to hear them, so I gesture toward a cluster of boulders that’s closer to them. Erik shakes his head, but I ignore him and tiptoe forward. We’re still near enough to the grove that if anyone from the Guild group looked up, they would see only darkness and branches.

Cormac and the other men’s attention stays on the mining site, and I tread quietly to the rocks. Straining, I can barely make out their conversation.

“How long until the site is expended?” Cormac’s voice, even from a distance, sends a tingle of apprehension running through me. I wasn’t sure I would ever be so close to him again. For one moment I consider running forward and pushing him into the drill site. It’s not a bad plan except that Cormac is only one cog in the machine of the Guild. Their operations might stall for a bit but his death wouldn’t be enough to destroy the entire system—even if it would be satisfying.

“You realize Jost is going to kill you.” Erik’s eyes dart around us, dutifully watching for trouble. “If Dante doesn’t first.”

I shush him and turn my attention back to the group. The space behind the rock is tight and Erik leans in against me to stay hidden. I’m not sure he’s ever acted this nervous around me.

Cormac is nodding. “We’ll need to expand farther in then. Unless you think we can risk the stability here longer.”

The man next to him, who I can’t help noticing is dressed in jeans and a plain shirt, responds, “I don’t think so. We risk a temporal collapse if we continue, but expanding won’t be easy. The natives are already restless in these parts, and Kincaid’s men are getting greedy.”

“They get that from Kincaid,” Cormac says. “No doubt he’s filled their heads with talk of his glorious revolution against the Guild. If they

only knew him like I do."

"Several Sunrunners have picked fights with miners in the last few weeks."

Cormac waves off the warning, unconcerned. "We'll send more Remnants in."

"Will you be bringing her here soon?" someone asks him.

"Perhaps. If we open a new site, Pryana will have to come for a visit." But his tone stays noncommittal.

So Pryana is slated to be the new Creweler. This is bad news. Pryana is a talented Spinster, but she's never shown the wisdom necessary for the powerful position of Creweler, the woman who oversees the entire pattern of Arras. Everything about her is wrong for the job.

Cormac dismisses most of the group, but one man lingers by his side.

"Sir, what if—"

"Believe me, Hannox, I'm considering it. I think Pryana can handle it. We haven't had to really test her yet," Cormac says to his companion.

Hannox: the man on the other end of the conversations overheard in Arras.

"And if she isn't?" Hannox asks.

"We'll deal with that when we know it's a problem," Cormac says, ignoring Hannox's concern.

"Until then we should keep up the search for Adelice, I assume," Hannox says.

"We know she's with Kincaid," Cormac says. "But I've had no word from the spy for weeks."

"Sir, it's not been very long on the surface," Hannox reminds him. "Give it time. Word will come. Until we've recovered her, we'll ration source material?"

"Yes, our supply is stocked for several months. I want skeleton operations at drill sites, and every surface resource focused on finding Adelice," Cormac commands.

"Sir, if she's dead—"

"She isn't," Cormac says. "And stop calling me sir. Dammit, Hannox, we've known each other one hundred and seventy-five years."

"Yes, *sir*." Hannox adds a bow and a salute to emphasize the point.

Cormac waves him off with a smirk. “See to the operations. I’ll take care of our missing Creweler.”

“I’ll liaise with the handlers and check for new intel,” Hannox promises.

“We’ll have images and details sent down so that they can recognize her, but under no circumstances are they to know why we’re looking for Adelice,” Cormac warns.

“What if she’s on Arras?” Hannox asks.

“She’s not smart enough to get into Arras undetected,” Cormac says. “But I’m increasing security and surveillance around her sister. If Adelice is up there, she’s going after Amie.”

“Someone’s spying on me. On us,” I whisper. The thump of my heart is so loud it nearly drowns the words. They’re coming after me, and even worse, they’re watching Amie.

“No surprise there,” Erik responds, tugging at my arm. We stay crouched behind the rock until Cormac and Hannox begin moving back to the camp.

“Who do you think it is? The spy?” I ask Erik after the men are out of earshot.

“It could be anybody,” he says. He nods back to the grove of trees and I follow him. My footfall is soft, but I feel heavy. Pryana might be capable of performing the tasks I’d hoped to keep from the Guild, but Cormac doubts her skill. My head turns over everything we’ve learned, sorting and tagging it into appropriate slots in my memory. Cormac even confirmed the disparity in time acceleration in Arras. He sent a spy weeks ago—was he talking about Deniel? That had happened only two days ago.

As soon as we’re back over the fence, Jost slams his hands into Erik, catching hold of his shirt. “That was stupid,” he says quietly, but his tone is fierce and angry.

“It’s my fault,” I say. “Erik tried to stop me.”

Jost doesn’t apologize to Erik, but he drops his hold on his brother.

“Come on, Ad,” Jost says, turning away from Erik.

“I don’t care what Kincaid will think,” Dante says, his hands clenched in tight balls at his sides. “If any of you go running off again, I’ll shoot you.”

“Noted. I’m sorry,” I say to him. But I’m not.

“We should head back.” Jost’s words are simple, but I can see the tension in his jaw. I know it won’t allay his anger, but I tell him about what we overheard at the mines and about Cormac’s presence. Jost keeps relatively calm, considering that was exactly the kind of danger he wants me to avoid.

“It’s bad enough that they know you’ve settled in with Kincaid, but if they get intelligence that you’ve left the estate—”

“They won’t miss the opportunity to get to me,” I finish for Dante.

“There’s an old ammo factory up the way. Our intel says they use it to weaponize and release new Remnants. It’s likely there’s some transport there,” Dante tells us, shifting from foot to foot. I can’t help but notice his eyes swiveling around us. It’s not like him to be so worried. “If their spies informed the Guild that you’re Sunrunning then we need to get out of here before they come looking for you, and the crawler is hours away.”

“Won’t there be Remnants?” I ask.

“We’ll stick together and check things out first,” Dante says. “We don’t have much of a choice, I’m afraid.”

“I’m not sure that I like this plan,” Jost says.

“Cormac Patton is on Earth, and he’s looking for you—” Dante begins.

“Looking for Adelice,” Erik corrects him. “She’s his blushing bride.”

“Oh shut up, Erik,” I say, making a gag-me face. “Maela’s missing you too, I’m sure.”

“So I’m home free,” Jost says in a voice that can only be described as joking.

Everyone turns to stare at him.

“What?” he asks, confused.

“Did you crack a joke?” Erik asks him slowly.

“*Oh shut up, Erik,*” he says, mimicking my face.

“Now you can both shut up,” I say, turning on my heel and moving alongside Dante. I need to think about what I’ve heard, about where to go from here.

NINETEEN

THE AMMUNITION FACTORY IS WELL KEPT ON the outside, but when we enter we're met with cobwebs and rust. Each step sends dust swimming into the air. The roof is glass, made opaque by years of neglect, and only a hint of light breaks through the muck. An abandoned conveyor belt hosts a line of rusted stools and little else, and images in faded paint still decorate the walls. I slow down to study them.

A man in a uniform, rifle in hand. A woman gazing at him in admiration. THE GIRL HE LEFT BEHIND IS STILL BEHIND HIM.

Another poster urges viewers to KEEP THE DANGER OVERSEAS. A woman smiles, her hands full of bullets. A shadow passes across the overlarge portrait. I turn, but no one's behind me.

"We lucked out. This place is empty. Let's find the storeroom," Dante calls, and I jog to catch up.

As we cross the factory, I reach for the arm of the person beside me, but come up empty. The other three are ahead of me and yet I would have sworn I felt Jost right beside me a moment ago.

"The Guild leaves these here?" Jost asks as we come up on a row of motocycles.

"It's where the Remnants are outfitted when new batches are brought in. They wake up here and are herded out into the Icebox with transport and weapons," Dante explains. He gestures to a stockpile of firearms along the wall, tossing a rifle each to Erik and Jost in turn.

"How did you know it would be empty?" I ask, refusing a weapon of my own.

"I didn't."

Something dashes along the periphery of my vision. It's probably a wild animal, but it's enough to raise goose bumps along my arms. There's no reason to discuss the Guild's methods since we've found what we came for, so I grab the handles of a motocycle. "Let's get these out of here."

As we wheel the cycles out of the building, my dread dissipates a little until Jost asks, “Where’s Dante?”

He isn’t with us. We wait by the door, but he doesn’t come, and then an acrid odor drifts out to where we’re standing. I don’t waste any more time. The air stings my eyes when I reenter the factory. Sulfur prickles along my nostrils. It smells like a fire, but who would be stupid enough to light one here? A body materializes, fading in from a shaded corner, but it’s not Dante.

Question answered.

The factory isn’t empty. The shadows weren’t tricks of my imagination. I spot Dante as he sends an old stool cracking across the head of a Remnant. He yells something that I can’t make out, but I think it’s a warning.

A Remnant leaps in front of us and Erik doesn’t lose a moment—he knocks off a shot. He doesn’t hit our would-be attacker, but the Remnant skitters away from us, disappearing back into the dark recesses of the factory.

“Should we be shooting in here?” I scream, but no one answers me. The acrid odor is replaced by smoke, and I see the beginning licks of a fire. It grows larger, consuming the machines, which pop and crack in the heat. We need to get out of here *fast*.

The inferno is building inside the ammunition factory and I can’t think of a worse place to be trapped. We’re only steps from the exit, but I whip around, grabbing for strands, and move and tuck and weave to build a trail of protection behind us. The rush of fear makes it easier to see the wild strands, but their unruliness slows me down. I have to look closely to differentiate the time strands from the matter. As we reach open air, the Remnant that Dante hit over the head jumps toward me, landing so close that I panic and miscalculate my work, yanking the wrong strand. It wrenches out from the strands surrounding it, brushing against the flames. It slides across the plant, shooting sparks that amplify the raging fire and then the factory shatters into smoke and debris.

Black plumes billow up from the burning plant, and as soon as we’re a safe distance away, I drop to my knees, hacking against the fumes I’ve inhaled. It could have been worse. No one seems to be hurt and we have what we came for.

I’m stumbling back to my feet when Dante grabs hold of my shirt and pushes me back down. “Want to leave any more proof that you’re here?”

“It was an accident,” I mumble, but it sounds weak even to my ears.

“Like that ship you unwound from the sky? You claim to want answers, to want to help us fight the Guild, but what I see is a stupid girl bent on blowing things up.” His words sting.

“Maybe next time I’ll let them kill you,” I scream. He’s hit his target though; I’m wounded by his accusation.

“Get control of it or don’t use it,” he seethes, towering over me. “You jeopardize everything because you don’t know what you’re doing.”

A hundred jibes tumble into my brain, but before I can settle on the one that will be the most hurtful, a Remnant limps from the plant’s remains. Erik’s on his feet, heading toward him, when Jost jumps in front of him.

“Let him go,” he commands.

“He’s going to run back and tell the others where we are,” Erik says.

“And by then we’ll be long gone,” Jost says. “We aren’t ready to take on another pack and these cycles will get us back to the crawler. The Guild will come to investigate what’s happened, so we need to get out of here.”

“So you’re going to let him go rat us out? These cycles better have lots of gas, because the second we stop they’ll catch up,” Erik scoffs.

“Cormac already knows we’re on Earth,” I say, trying to defuse the situation.

“He doesn’t know you’re *here*,” Erik reminds me.

“Let’s go,” Dante says. His anger at me still flames in his words, but he sounds distant now. Determined.

I’d lost track of how far we’d traveled to find the mines, but I know the crawler is hours away. With the motocycles we can get back to it fast, but I know it might already be too late. It won’t take the Guild long to realize something has happened. I can only hope they assume the explosion was caused by the Remnants. I can’t imagine that they haven’t had problems controlling them before, especially if the Guild keeps them locked in a factory.

The only roads between here and where we left the equipment are cracked with age. It’s probably not a top priority to maintain roads out

here, but it makes riding the cycle trickier. I've nearly skidded off course twice but manage to keep my motocycle upright. It's a good thing too, because we've lost Dante and Erik, who are now so far ahead of us they would never hear a crash. It's cold out here as night really settles in, and save for dark piles of bones that I hope are those of animals, there's not much to see.

I'm finally getting the hang of riding the cycle when it begins to make a spluttering noise. Jost responds by speeding up to cut off the others, and by the time they turn back, I'm waiting next to the immobile motocycle.

"Out of gas," Dante proclaims, and we redistribute so that I am now riding with Jost.

"How much farther do we have to go?" Erik asks.

"Not much longer, especially now that we can keep pace with one another," Dante says, and I feel heat flood my cheeks.

We race through the crumbling roads, zipping around large cracks and holes. My suspicion that I was holding Jost back was right. The ride is terrifying. It's harder to trust the safety of the cycle when I'm not the one controlling it. Whirling through the crisp air, my hair beats across my face, and I clutch Jost's waist. The speed results in a sort of paralysis of mind and body, and I keep my eyes shut. The only part of me that seems to be working are the arms that squeeze around him tighter with each jerk of the motorcycle, and then the hum of the motocycle fades down, and I realize that we're coming to a stop. Carefully opening one eye, I peer over Jost's shoulder, not sure what to expect.

The crawler sits before me, and I can't believe how happy I am to see it, considering I hate riding in it. Dante wastes no time gathering the charges and panels. Shame over our screaming match seeps into my chest. Dante came out here to do work, and I messed everything up.

"Did you get any solar energy?" I ask him, trying to make conversation.

"Enough," he says with a grunt. He hoists a panel onto his shoulder and turns away from me.

"Enough?"

"Enough that Kincaid might not ask questions about where the hell we've been all day," Dante says.

He ignores me as the boys help him load up the back of the crawler. Erik throws me concerned glances, but no one says anything more about what happened at the ammunition factory.

“Sit up front?” Dante asks when we go to leave. I’m surprised that it’s a request and not a demand.

I look to Jost, and he leans down to my ear and whispers, “You should talk.”

I take the front seat and wait for the lecture to begin, but when Dante finally speaks, it’s not what I’m expecting to hear.

“You should know why I agreed to let you come along—”

“Because you knew I wanted to see the mines,” I guess, but Dante shakes his head.

“I didn’t take you to see the mines or to learn about Sunrunning. I brought you because I didn’t want to leave you at the estate with Kincaid after his little play,” Dante says.

“Kincaid doesn’t realize he’s scaring me,” I say, fully believing it. Kincaid thought unwinding Deniel and staging that play would help me feel safer. In his own way, he’s as twisted as Cormac Patton.

“He knows what he’s doing, Adelice. Kincaid is many things, and you would do well to remember that,” Dante warns. “But I’m sorry, Adelice. I shouldn’t have attacked you like that.”

“No.” I stop him. “It was stupid of me. I clearly don’t know what I’m doing here.”

Dante pauses, shifting the crawler into a higher gear. His eyes flick over to me. “I think we should work on that. You have a magnificent talent, but it won’t do you any good if you can’t control it.”

He’s being reasonable, but I still feel smaller as he speaks. The words are a carefully disguised reprimand—once again, he sounds like my father. I dreaded Benn Lewys’s gentle rebukes more than any punishment he could dole out, usually because I knew he was right. Apparently Dante shares that quality with his brother.

“You’re probably right,” I mumble.

Dante opens his mouth, but then he shuts it again. We’re both trying. Only we have no idea how to do this. I concentrate on thinking about how to approach this problem, how to accept what we are to each other,

the rest of the ride, but when we pull through the estate's gate, I'm no closer to a solution than I was before.

TWENTY

THE ESTATE IS QUIET, HEAVY WITH SLEEP, when we arrive. We part ways with murmured good nights, eager for baths and beds, but Jost takes my hand as we climb the steep stairs into the mansion. He holds my hand when we get inside, but he doesn't ask what Dante and I were talking about on the ride home.

An angry voice echoes through the silence, and I freeze. Jost tugs me along but not before I overhear the argument.

"You are not to remove her from this estate again," Kincaid commands. "I expect better judgment from you."

"It was a simple gathering trip. We set up the panels and enjoyed some sun. It was fine," Dante says. His lie is smooth and believable.

"This is a warning. Consider what would happen to your precious girl if they caught her. She's here under my protection." The song is out of Kincaid's voice, his words fierce and demanding.

"I appreciate that," Dante says.

"Do you, Dante?" Kincaid asks. "You have a strange way of showing it."

Their voices fade, but I'm sure Jost heard it, too: Dante lied for me. I can't digest what it means, any more than I can understand Jost's silent treatment.

"Come on," Jost says. "I'm tired."

But before we can continue toward our rooms, Dante speaks. He's quieter than he was with Kincaid, so I dart closer to his voice, coming from the large assembly room. I hide in the shadows of a neglected piano.

"It was a long day, Jax," Dante says. I imagine him running his hands through his hair as speaks.

"Trouble?" Jax asks.

"Remnants. Mines. You name it."

Dante is telling Jax what really happened, which means he trusts him, unlike Kincaid.

“Do I want to know how you got yourself into that mess?” Jax asks.

“My *daughter*.” The word is overemphasized, as though Dante is tasting it to see if he likes it.

“She must take after you,” Jax says, clearly amused.

“Don’t start,” Dante warns. “She could have gotten us all killed, and she might as well have sent Cormac an invitation to our outing. It was so obvious that we were there.”

“What are you going to do about her?”

“Knock some sense into her?” Dante says. “I don’t know. She’s stubborn. Oh, don’t give me that look. I know: *she gets it from me*.”

“She’s been through a lot,” Jax says. “Her life in Arras. Her mother. Even what that scum Deniel tried to do to her. Give her the benefit of the doubt.”

“I’m trying, but I don’t want to see her get killed.” There’s a pause in the conversation, and I realize I’ve stopped breathing. “I barely know her.”

“Do you want to?” Jax asks him.

“Yes, I do.” There’s certainty in his words, and I find I’m relieved.

“Did you manage to get any solar energy above the quota?” Jax asks, changing subjects.

“No. I’m sorry. I know how important it is to your work …”

Jost guides me away, urging me to the elevator. We’re both too tired to take the stairs tonight. I have no more interest in Dante’s conversation, but plenty to contemplate. Dante wants to know me. I’m not sure how to feel about that.

When we reach our suite, Jost fills a basin of hot water in his bathroom and brings it to me. We’re both filthy, covered in dirt from the road and ash from the explosion at the ammunition factory. I dip my hands in the basin, rubbing them clean. I’ll take a bath later.

“Dante was upset,” Jost says finally, and it’s evident from his clipped tone that he is as well.

“According to Dante, I have no control over my talents,” I say.

“You sure about that?” he asks.

“I’m always right,” I joke, trying to lighten the mood.

“Don’t I know it,” he says, unamused. Sullen Jost has returned. Until today’s disastrous events it felt like our relationship had turned a corner,

as though we were finally moving forward. I thought he could be happy again. But shades of angry Jost are showing themselves, and suddenly I don't want to discuss anything with him. Not that he'll want to talk anyway. He never does when he's locked inside his own head.

So instead of telling him anything more, I watch him stand and move to the washbasin. I keep watching as he strips off his dirty shirt.

Why don't I want to go to him? Not so long ago, seeing him like this, being alone with him, would have been enough. But now I feel like I'm the only one wanting, and it's making me numb.

I force the hurt down, and go to him. Before he can turn to me, I wrap my arms around him and bury my face in his back. He smells like sweat from our adventures earlier, and when I press my lips to his skin, all I taste is salt.

As I kiss his shoulder, I feel him exhale and then, to my surprise, instead of pulling out of my embrace, he wraps his hands around my wrists and pulls me closer to him.

A shiver runs through me, and I kiss him again. My arms thaw, followed by my chest, until my entire body responds to the contact. I push up on tiptoes to kiss his neck. Then his ear. He spins me to face him but he doesn't push me away. His arms twist around my waist. But he doesn't kiss me, he tucks his face against my neck, trailing his lips along until they're in my hair.

He breathes in deeply and murmurs, "You smell like smoke and fire."

I smile a little and somehow I know he is smiling, too.

But I don't let him continue; instead I bring my lips to his. He meets my eagerness, and this kiss is different. His body reacts to mine, crushing closer to me, each of us trying to fuse with the other. I can feel the desperation in our embrace, but there's want there, too. A need for closeness. A need for something we've been denying too long. Something we could lose any moment.

And then he presses me onto my heels and I realize as I stumble back, still kissing him, that he's leading me to his bed.

I don't need to think about it. I just have to keep going.

He lays me down gently, and the bed is too small, and I don't care, because Jost is on top of me and he's kissing me and I want him. And he wants me.

It's right.

It's right.

It's right.

I bury my face against his chest as he moves back to my neck and I reach for his pants.

His hand grabs my wrist.

And like that the need—the desire—is gone. It sucks from the room, leaving only dry air in its wake.

"Ad," he manages between breaths, "I can't."

"Won't," I accuse. It's the same way he reacted in my room before the play. He pulled away from me then. He's been pulling away since we got to Earth.

"Don't start this again," he says, standing up and grabbing a shirt from the dresser nearby. "I don't want to argue."

"Considering you force us to drop it every time we're in this situation, I wouldn't call it having an argument," I snap, smoothing my shirt back into place.

He turns from me and leans against the dresser, and I can't decide if I should slip out. Is this is my cue to exit, because he's done talking? Or does he expect me to stay? It's hard to tell since he isn't telling me anything these days. After a few minutes I stand to leave, an embarrassed blush creeping onto my neck.

"Don't go," he says softly.

I stop and wait.

"This isn't easy for me," he continues.

"And it is for me? Do you think I'm happy here?" I wonder if I'm even capable of happiness anymore, but I don't say this to Jost. Too much moving forward. Too much planning the next move. There's no time for happiness, and it's becoming clear that there's no possibility of it with what we've discovered here. If we can't get lost with each other, what's the point?

"I could be happy with you anywhere if …"

And there it is: *if*. I'm not sure what I expect him to say. *If you were happier. If you hadn't brought Erik. If we weren't caught in the middle of a war. If. If. If.*

“Don’t you understand that we can’t sleep together?” he finally asks. It’s the last direction I expected this conversation to go in.

“Is that what this is about? Sex?” My voice peaks on the word.

“Ad, if we have sex, we can’t go back.”

I stare at him for a long moment, hoping he’ll elucidate what he means, because it makes no sense to me.

“Wait,” I say slowly, starting to grasp the heart of the problem. “Is this because of purity standards?”

“Of course,” he says. “If we have sex, we could go back to Arras to rescue the girls, but your skill is our most powerful weapon. We’ll never get to Sebrina or Amie without it.”

It’s hard to tell which emotion wins out at this proclamation: anger, annoyance, relief? They mingle and leave a sour taste in my mouth.

“You know purity standards aren’t real, right?” I hate how condescending I sound, but I thought Jost was smarter than this.

“How do you know that, Adelice?”

“Seriously? Because Cormac told me but also because half of the Spinsters were sleeping with officials and valets.” I bite my tongue to keep from using Erik as a definite example of this phenomenon.

“Are you willing to risk the girls on a hunch?”

That does it.

“Why don’t you ask your brother?” I say, without hiding the seething frustration in my voice.

“So he screwed Maela. That hardly proves your point. She didn’t have any talent anyway.”

“Well, what about Enora?” I ask. “I’m sure she and Valery, you know …”

“Do you know?” he counters. “Did either of them tell you? Have you asked Valery?”

So that’s it. We’re going to have an argument without any way to prove that I’m right without risking I’m wrong. *Perfect*.

“Cormac wouldn’t have been planning to marry me if sex was going to destroy my skills,” I argue, because I’m sure that was where most of his attraction to me lay.

“But he knew how to map you. He could have fixed your skills after or given them to someone else and kept you home …”

Barefoot and pregnant. The thought is enough to make me sick.

"You are going to have to trust me on this, Jost. It's a lie. Ask Erik," I say, crossing my arms over my chest. "On second thought, don't. That would be weird."

"Come here," he says, the hostility of his tone dropping off. I bury my face in his chest and marvel at how soft his shirt is and how, even now a world away, it still smells the same as it did in Arras. His scent makes something ache in my chest, but I'm not sure if it's longing or sadness now.

"Ad, it won't be much longer, and then …" He trails off, and I can almost hear the hesitation in the air.

"Then?" Surely he won't reject me then.

"Then we can be a family," he says, and now I understand.

If sex is the topic Jost is skirting around, then family is the one I'm trying to avoid. I want Amie and Sebrina back, but I'm not sure I'm ready to be a family. Going back for the girls isn't where things end, it only puts me in more danger than ever. Danger I want to avoid placing the girls in.

"What if we can't be?" I whisper.

Jost's eyes narrow and I can see the condemnation in them. "Because you don't want her."

I want to deny this. I want to explain the danger and my need to protect Amie and Sebrina, but I can't. So I don't say anything at all, which is probably worse.

"I didn't ask you to be her mother, Ad," he says quietly, but his tone is anything but soft. It tears with accusation. "Why did you even tell me she was alive?"

"How can you ask that?"

"It's what I'm honestly wondering," he says. "Why are you even here now?"

"I-I-I care about you," I stammer, shocked at the way his words cut. "We belong together."

"Maybe we did in Arras, but what about when we get them back?" he asks. "I can't abandon my daughter. I thought you understood that. What about your sister?"

"It's different," I admit.

“Because she won’t come between us,” he says wisely.

“No, it’s not that. I can’t be a mother. Amie won’t need me that way.” *And they’ll both be safer without me*, I add silently.

“I didn’t ask you to be,” he repeats.

“No, you might not have, but, Jost, you’re going to be a father—”

“Ad, I’ve always been a father,” he says in a tired voice. “That never went away.”

But you didn’t seem like one, I want to say. He’s right. I’ve always chosen to ignore how awkward his past made me feel, especially when it came to his daughter. And I’ve denied how things will change once she’s back. I won’t be able to protect her or care for her. Even my being with Jost would be a risk to her.

“I can’t waste time waiting for you to be ready. I won’t be like you and Dante. I don’t want to be a stranger to Sebrina. Maybe we need to focus on a plan for now,” he suggests.

My eyes meet his and I understand exactly what he’s saying, and something twists and snaps in my chest, leaving a hollow ache in its wake. But I want him to say it. I want him to own it.

“Instead of?” I ask quietly.

“Instead of worrying about us.”

I have to push against the raw ache in my throat to keep my voice steady, but I manage to ask, “Like, we’ll figure it out later, or like, we’ll remove the ‘us problem’ altogether?”

“Altogether,” he says in a firm voice.

Why had I wanted to hear him say it? So I wouldn’t have to dissect exactly what he meant by “instead of worrying about us”? Because this wasn’t the answer I was hoping for, even if it’s the one I knew was coming.

I want to crumple onto the floor. Part of me wants to sob and beg, making me feel like a traitor to the person I thought I was. As the rawness builds in my throat, I nod, without a single tear, and turn on my heel. The door feels like it’s a million miles away and with each step I nearly lose my resolve, but Jost doesn’t say anything to stop me and that helps.

The tears sting my cheeks as the lock clicks behind me.

TWENTY-ONE

THE SCENT OF JASMINE FLOATS THROUGH THE room as the faucet pours water into my claw-foot tub. I step away from it, kicking off my soft slippers. As I step into the water, its chill surprises me. It's warm, but not the hot bath I was expecting. I sink in and feel goose bumps rise all over. I take a deep breath and push myself completely under the surface. My hair swirls around me and after a few seconds of weightlessness, I open my eyes. The world swims before them and the water burns, but I don't shut them again. I stay this way until my lungs feel like they'll collapse from the effort of staying underwater.

When I rise from the bath, I feel reborn, and yet my face is still too pale and the scarlet of my dyed hair has finally faded into a recognizable copper. I slip into the same dressing gown despite discovering a tear in the sleeve. The mirror lies to me, offering an unchanged reflection when everything about me is different.

*

I don't leave my room the next morning. I stay in my dressing gown, torn sleeve and all. It's clean and otherwise comfortable. Someone brings me food, but it grows cold on the serving tray it arrived on. A cart of sweets and delicacies and none of it looks good. There's wine, too. But I don't want to drink it. I tried to lose my grief in a bottle when Enora died, but I want to feel this. I want it to tear at me so that my heart is scar tissue when it heals—harder to break and less sensitive to pain.

The truth is, I don't feel anything. I don't feel sadness or anger. The numbness is crippling. The only thing that seems true in this moment is that this was inevitable.

How do girls my age in Arras get married? Do they fight with their husbands? I can't remember my parents fighting. But marriage is different from being in love, I remind myself. It's permanent—legal and

binding. I couldn’t walk out of a marriage like I walked out on Jost last night. He has no claim to me, and I have no claim to him.

I’m still in my dressing gown when there’s a hard rap on my door. I open it expecting to see Jost.

Dante takes in my disheveled appearance and my fallen face, but he doesn’t comment. He’s too tense. Excited, maybe. He looks like Benn right down to the crease forming between his thick eyebrows.

No. *Anxious*.

“Come on,” he says, pulling me into the hallway.

I clutch my robe together. “I’m not dressed.”

“There’s not time,” he says, dragging me along.

I wrench my arm free. “Okay.”

I retie my robe as modestly as possible while trying to keep pace with him. I’m more than a little surprised when we run through the grand marble entrance and right out the front door. We pound down the side staircase so quickly that I grip its long carved railing to keep from falling down the brick steps. Dante leads me past the drive to the outer road, where a group of crawlers wait. These ones are armored. Their roofs are made of thick metal, but looking closer I see there are holes in the tops. A Sunrunner pops up through one and I realize what they’re for: scouting. Dozens of men are loading up crates and weaponry.

“What’s going on?” I ask, suddenly fearful. We were in Guild territory yesterday; did they track us back here? Is Cormac coming after me?

Kincaid appears over Dante’s shoulder. He’s wearing a thick black vest, not unlike the ones the guards at the Coventry wear. I know they are worn for protection there, but Kincaid doesn’t seem like the type to put himself in harm’s way. Not unless something important drives him to it.

Kincaid slithers up to me and watches the men. His eyes glint in the false daylight of the artificial lighting system.

“We’re going on a mission,” he tells me. The omnipresent glee is in his voice. All around us men test rifles and pull on vests, but you’d think Kincaid was going camping.

“What?” I put my question to Dante this time, unsure I’ll get real information from Kincaid. A Sunrunner dashes past us, knocking against me slightly and pushing me into Kincaid.

His gloved hands catch me, but he releases me as soon as I'm steady. His eyes flick to the offending man, and I wonder what punishment is in store for him.

"We have info on the Whorl," Dante says. "One of our scouts found some information in the Heart."

"The heart?"

"Heartland, middle of former America. It's in the dead center of the Interface's cover."

"I thought it was mostly abandoned," I say.

"It is. There are a few outposts though," Dante says. "Kincaid's intel indicates the Whorl may be hidden in one of them. They're heading to check it out."

"I want to go, too," I say.

"Impossible," Kincaid says, his focus remaining on the flurry of activity surrounding us. "I want you to stay safely on the estate."

"Not a good idea," Dante says to me. "It's several days of travel and rough company. I'm staying behind with you—"

"I'm not a child," I say, feeling a bit petulant despite my claim. But as soon as the words escape my lips, I spot Jost loading a bag into one of the crawlers. "He's going?"

I don't know how the question comes out because I feel the familiar paralysis of last night in my chest.

"Yes, he was the first to volunteer. He's very single-minded," Dante says. "They're leaving quickly, and I didn't want you to miss saying goodbye. I know you want to go with him, but—"

I hold up my hand to stop him. "You win. I'll stay here. Bye."

"I knew you would see reason. Which is why I'm sure you won't mind staying on the estate during our absence. Under no circumstances are you to leave. I've informed security," Kincaid says.

"What?" I ask, my voice breaking. I clamp my mouth shut to stay the tears rising in my throat. I won't let them see me cry. The Guild knows we're here, and the answers I've been searching for aren't here on the estate. Kincaid is putting me in a purported net of safety, but I feel trapped, like bait dangling from a snare.

"It's for your own security," Kincaid assures me. "I would hate to see you fall into the wrong hands. Dante is staying as well. It will give you a

chance to get to know each other."

The prospect of growing closer to a man who doesn't hide his disapproval of me is small comfort.

"Valery will be traveling with me, but I'm leaving Jax behind. He should be able to maintain grid operations in an emergency," Kincaid says to Dante.

While they are distracted, I dash off. Dante calls out after me but he's swept back into the conversation before he can stop me. I don't stay to watch the preparations. I gather up the hem of my robe so I don't trip over it and flee back to my room.

Sensation is creeping through the blessed numbness—a horrible clawing that rips at my chest. But before I can shut the door behind me and figure how to feel about this, a hand pushes it open and Jost ducks in. His eyes are flat and cold, but the trance melts as we stare at each other. I'm glad we're not immune to each other's presence.

"I'm leaving," he says. His tone is clipped. Formal.

"I heard … saw …" My words stumble out of me, and I want to sink into a puddle on the floor from embarrassment. Where is the girl who sat in her room, not crying, not feeling now? Why has she abandoned me at this precise moment?

"They have info on the Whorl. If they find it, I need to know," he says.

"Why? You can't do anything with it," I point out.

"We could control Arras and if we do, I won't rely on anyone else to help me get to Sebrina. Every second we waste here, I lose minutes with her! I don't trust any of them to care about that," he says. "I don't expect you to understand."

"I do understand." The words explode from my mouth.

"I thought you did, but I can't expect you to care about Sebrina the way you care about Amie or your agenda. If you want to get caught up in their war, so be it. I'm going after my daughter."

He's drawn a line down the room, the edge from our argument last night creeping into his voice. It's a line I'm not welcome to cross.

"Leaving doesn't change anything," I say.

"I know," Jost says coolly. "I don't want it to."

Okay, *that* hurt.

“To be clear, I want you to rescue Sebrina, too,” I say.

“I know that, Ad,” Jost says, “but you aren’t willing to fight to help me.”

That hurt, too.

“I’ve never stopped fighting,” I claim.

“It doesn’t matter,” he says. “You aren’t responsible for her.”

“Sooner or later, you’ll have to let someone else in, Jost Bell,” I say.

“Why?” he asks.

I hesitate.

“I never wanted it to be like this—” he begins.

“You should go,” I say, cutting him off. “I guess this is goodbye.”

Jost reaches out and tucks a loose strand of hair behind my ear, and I shatter, falling piece by piece back to the dome of safety in Arras. Back to stolen kisses. The memories mix together, muddling into something black and viscous, and the words I should say die on my lips.

“No, I’m not saying goodbye.” He walks out, sending my world spinning.

TWENTY-TWO

I STARE BLANKLY AT THE DOOR. THE only light streams in from the opened curtains, and everything around me is washed out and colorless. It feels false, even though this is reality. This is the real world. My real world, and I don't want any part of it.

I'm still sitting there when Erik pushes the door open and peeks into my room. "Hey, you."

I can't manage a reply.

"I heard," Erik says, the blue of his eyes deep and concerned, "about Jost."

"I'm so tired of this," I say through gritted teeth. "I'm so tired of fighting with him."

"But he's gone now."

I swallow, trying to digest the bitter truth of his words. "Yes. He is."

"Which means you don't have to fight anymore." Erik moves beside me, hovering next to my vanity and waiting for me to speak.

I glance up at him. His expression is hard, but there's something beneath it. Conflict.

"Erik—" I start to say.

"Don't," he says, putting a finger on my lips. I close my eyes and a tear falls, cold against my heated skin.

"You're crying," he says, and his hands drop from my face.

"It's … it's not you," I say, because it isn't.

It isn't him. I know how he feels. And part of me wants to crash into him and forget. Forget Jost. Forget everything that's happened since we left Arras. But Erik deserves more than I can give him. He deserves more than I can give anyone.

"For once let yourself feel something, Ad!" Erik yells, losing his composed attitude. "You can't push everything down and make it disappear."

"I feel alone," I mumble.

"You aren't." Erik stands over me shaking his head. "You have me."

“You deserve better,” I say to him, standing so that he can’t peer down at me like he’s looking into my soul.

“You’re the closest thing to a friend I’ve had for a long time.” He fingers the tear in my sleeve, and I pull my arm back. “So you can’t push me away, because I’m not giving up on you.”

“I feel like a lost cause. I’m tired of running and fighting, Erik. I don’t know what I’m doing anymore. They didn’t even take me on the mission because I’m so useless. I guess I’m ready for this to be over,” I admit.

“This isn’t you,” he says. “Adelice Lewys rips the world apart. She attacks Remnants. She’s a little stupid but not helpless.”

“Do you really know me, Erik?” I ask, and the words taste sour. They build in my throat, unleashing themselves with an anger that pushes me forward to stare at my reflection screaming in the vanity mirror. “About him—about anything. I don’t even know why I’m doing this. I don’t know who I am anymore!”

I lash out at the image in front of me, flinging brushes and cosmetics across the room. They clatter to the floor, bottles shattering. The destruction calms me enough for me to break the hold of the mirror.

Erik’s shoulders drop, but his hands curl into fists. “I do.”

I stare at Erik as he bends to gather the scattered glass from the floor, wondering how he can be so certain. Of me. Of what we’re doing here. Isn’t he the boy who was angry for being ripped to Earth? How has he grown so much?

“Look, Ad,” he says, dropping to kneel next to me. “You are extraordinary.”

“I don’t want to be extraordinary,” I say softly, not meeting his eyes.

“I don’t mean your skills. You’re not extraordinary because you can weave, you are extraordinary because you have a good soul. Much better than mine. Or Jost’s. Or pretty much everyone I’ve ever known,” he says.

“A good soul who let her father die, who lets her mom sit in a prison cell. You know why Jost left, because he doesn’t think I can handle Sebrina.”

“Handle Sebrina?”

“Like be her mom or whatever.”

“That’s a lot to ask anyone,” Erik says.

“But if I loved him wouldn’t I have said I could, wouldn’t I have fought for it?” I ask.

I want him to answer me, because this is the question pressing at my chest, bearing down at my lungs. An answer would be my oxygen.

“You mean you can’t fathom how you would respond to someone you’ve never met in a situation you’ve never been in?”

I know the point Erik is trying to make, but it falls flat.

“Ad, he’s scared. Not just of not getting to Sebrina,” he says, “but of losing you.”

“Of losing me?” I repeat.

“You’re in more danger now than Rozenn ever was. People are chasing you. People who want to kill you or use you. He knows that.”

“So he’s protecting me?” I don’t buy it. The pain in Jost’s eyes wasn’t from loss, it was from betrayal. I know that. I betrayed him, and the worst part is that I’m not even sure how.

“He’s protecting himself.”

“I’m not even sure we ever loved each other. I mean, not like my parents,” I say.

“It’s not that simple,” Erik points out. “Your parents loved each other, but your mother also loved Dante.”

“I know. That makes it even harder to understand. I know she loved Benn, my father, but why didn’t she even mention Dante?”

“She was protecting you, but she was also protecting herself, like Jost. Some things are too painful to bear. Jost can’t stand even thinking about losing you, and he almost has several times. He thinks if he shuts you out he won’t lose you.” Erik pauses and puts his hand on my knee. “But some people have too large an impact on our lives for us to imagine we can forget them. I know if I’d known you a week and lost you, I’d miss you the rest of my life.”

“I’d miss you, too.”

I see something hidden behind his friendly demeanor and the burning force of it frightens me. But he’s slipping back into our safe relationship now. The one where he doesn’t betray his brother. The one where I don’t have to choose.

“You going to be all right?”

“Yes,” I say. And somehow, despite the empty echo in my chest, I know I will be. “I’m going to wake up tomorrow and it will be a new day. Promise me something?”

“Anything,” he says.

“That you’ll drag me out of bed if I don’t get up tomorrow,” I say, stumbling a bit over the sadness creeping into my words.

Erik sighs, but agrees. “I promise. And what are your plans after you manage that?”

“I’m going to have Dante teach me how to alter.”

“You know how to have a good time,” Erik says.

“I’m quite the party girl,” I agree.

“Can I come?” Erik asks.

“Sure,” I say.

“I wasn’t invited on their little hunting trip,” he says. “And I’m getting a bit bored around here.”

“You could swim,” I suggest. “There are about ten pools.”

“No trunks,” Erik says, wiggling his eyebrows suggestively. “I’d have to skinny-dip.”

I know my face is on fire right now, but I grin despite myself and push him out of my room. I have plenty to do today. Like cry away this ache so I can start tomorrow in a new world.

TWENTY-THREE

THERE ARE THOUSANDS OF STRANDS WEAVING IN brilliant discord through the greenhouse once I focus in on them. It's taken me nearly a week to get to the point where I can see the strands on Earth without adrenaline pumping through me and it's now over two weeks since the mission left, making me feel like an empty well drained of every resource. Without the organized weave of Arras, it's been harder to command my skill—both in manipulating the natural strands of the universe and in seeing them.

Now as I stare at them, I try to home in on one. I could grab any number of the overlarge room's strands; the space around me is full to bursting. A low hum fills the air from the backup generator Dante has turned on to give us more light. The old halogen bulbs illuminate the room but their constant flickering seems to warn of their impending demise. Between that and the buzzing of the generator, it's harder to feel the strands' vibrance. The problem isn't that I can't see the strands, it's that Dante wants me to find one specific thread—the time strand located within a petite orchid.

I'm trying to slip my fingers into the weave of the flower. I hold the strand at an angle, keeping my finger on the particular one Dante has asked me to find. I'm sure it's easier for him to point one out than for me to find and grip the precise strand he's referring to, which is exactly what he's trying to show me. I gingerly grasp the golden thread and tug to pull it into a warp. My touch is gentle but the thread cracks through the air, splitting a petal in two. The pieces fall bruised to the ground. My eyes meet Erik's; he's watching from a nearby stool. He came for moral support, but I know we're thinking the same thing: we're going to be here forever.

"No," Dante says. His tone is patient, which has the strange effect of making me feel *very impatient.*

"It's occurred to you that this is hopeless, right?" I ask, dropping the strand in defeat and settling back against a table full of pots and plants. It creaks under my weight. I know how it feels.

“Only if you tell yourself it is,” Dante says simply, but he cracks his left knuckles as he speaks.

Never mind. The Zen master is getting a bit tired.

“If you are in a fight, your skill has to be controlled. What would happen if you grabbed the wrong strand?” It’s not a question. We’ve both seen what happens, but I’m getting tired of him constantly bringing up the ammunition factory as an example.

“We’d get out alive. That’s what matters.”

“Is it?” he demands. “And how can you be certain you would, with such a cavalier attitude?”

“I haven’t killed any of us yet.” I stop fingering the strands around me and plant my hands on my hips.

“You nearly did at the factory. You weren’t in control,” he says. “I’d call that dangerous.”

“I’d call that *lucky*. It bought us time.”

Dante shrugs, rubbing the frond of a tall potted fern. “We view things with a different perspective, Adelice. Your escape from Arras was brave but too risky. When you wield your power like that, you put everyone in your path at risk.”

“No one was hurt,” I argue, but this time my argument sounds small and weak, because I know he has a point.

“Perhaps not, if that makes you feel better, but how would you feel if someone was caught in the tear? If Jost, for instance—”

“I don’t need a lecture. I need you to teach me.”

“You’re missing the point,” he says. “You already know what to do. You have to learn to control your skill.”

So I’ve been told. Repeatedly.

“I’m trying!” I explode.

Dante sighs but his face softens. The crease in his forehead vanishes. “Close your eyes.”

“But—”

“Do it,” he snaps. “You need to find the time strand moving past you. You must isolate it if you want to protect the objects and people around you.”

“No sh—”

“Feel for the pulse,” he says firmly.

“Time doesn’t have the pulse, the matter does—*the life*,” I argue, but I keep my eyes closed. I can feel the matter around me. If I concentrate I can hear its crackling vitality under the room’s ambient sounds.

“Time’s pulse is different. It’s more like the wind—ephemeral, always changing a little. Matter is vibrant, throbbing with energy. Time is like a whisper. You can only catch it if you listen closely,” he murmurs. “Accept that you’re a part of it and that it’s a part of you like the beat of your heart.”

I clear my mind and reach out with my fingers. I don’t grab anything, I caress the strands around me. They pulsate, pounding with vital life. Strands of matter. I’m shocked at the sensation in my fingertips. Maybe I didn’t concentrate so intensely in Arras, but every strand I touch throbs through me. I drop them and focus on the space around me, tuning out everything but the thrum of the world. And then it’s there—a tinny whistle that fades in and out of my hearing. Almost metallic, it oscillates between a faint rhythm and a heavy, inelegant hammering. I let my fingers reach out, trying to match the sound with the tactile sensation. They close over a thin strand and I feel the intensity of its pulse shift, growing louder and more demanding in my hand.

“Better,” Dante says, breaking my concentration.

As I open my eyes, he fingers a glowing strand of time.

“I’m glad you approve,” I say. “But I can’t stop and concentrate in a fight.”

“Of course not,” he agrees. “That’s not what I’m trying to make you understand. You must let go to unleash your ability. You are strongest when you aren’t trying.”

I try to hold back a groan, but I can’t. “Then isn’t training the exact opposite of what I should be doing?”

“Don’t think of it as training, think of it as honing.”

“A differentiation worthy of a politician,” I mutter. “Maybe I’m not cut out for this.”

“You were made for this,” Dante says, placing a hand on my shoulder. “We both were. Weaving and altering skills aren’t accidental. They’re your genetic legacy. But you have to accept your gift. Once you do that—once you make it a fundamental aspect of who you are—it will be as simple as breathing.”

Something I’m looking forward to, especially if it means I can stop training and get some sleep. It’s going to be tricky, considering my parents trained me to ignore my weaving ability, not to accept it. I practiced that for years, and now Dante thinks he can undo that preparation.

“What happened to your hands?” he asks.

I hold out my hands and he inspects them.

“A Spinster punished me,” I say.

“By trying to destroy your fingers?”

“I wove razor wire and steel.” I pull my hands back, suddenly self-conscious about the scars that are still visible from Maela’s revenge.

“You’re lucky to have fingers at all,” he says. “But, Adelice, your skill lies as much in your mind as your hands. Stop being so tentative, it’s making you clumsy.”

“That’s what’s holding me back?” I ask.

“I’ve seen you let go when you need to. In that alley to save your mother and in the ammunition factory.”

“I thought you didn’t approve of my use of my skills,” I say.

“I didn’t. You reacted brashly,” he says. “But you relaxed and channeled your ability in those instances. Your hands didn’t stop you. Don’t let that stop you now.”

I nod, embarrassment growing a lump in my throat.

“I think we’re done for the day,” he tells me. “There’s a problem with the photovoltaic array at the power plant that I need to look into.”

“Is Jax helping you?” I ask. “I haven’t seen him in a while.” Jax and I aren’t exactly friends, but after Erik he is still the friendliest person on the estate.

A shadow passes over Dante’s face. “He’s on the mission.”

“He is?” I ask. “Sorry, I thought he had stayed.”

I consider accompanying Dante to the power plant, but even the sight of the smokestacks makes me cringe. I’m still embarrassed by my mistake at the ammunition factory. If Jax isn’t going to be there, I’m not sure I want to go with Dante. Thinking of the plant, I recall what he said earlier. “What happens if I catch someone in a warp?”

“In the best-case scenario, you merely trap them in the caught time.”

I know that from experience. I count on it actually.

“What if it’s more serious?” I ask quietly.

“You could damage their thread. Maim them. Kill them. That’s why it’s imperative you learn to focus on time. Grabbing matter uncontrolled is too risky. You know how delicate we are. One wrong move and you could rip someone in half.”

“What I really want to know is how to alter,” I admit.

Dante stops and gives me a heavy look. “I assumed so. It’s not as glamorous as it looks.”

“I saw what they did to Deniel,” I say. “I’m aware of how *glamorous* it is.”

“You saw the worst thing that Tailors do,” he says.

The worst? Yes, what happened to Deniel was horrible, but what about removing people’s souls or altering their memories? What about the other ways Tailors and the Guild take away people’s lives? Take away the very essence of who they are?

“Tailors can help people, too, Adelice. A trained Tailor can patch a thread and heal someone,” Dante says.

“I’ve only seen them do that to people *they* hurt in the first place,” I say, planting my hands on my hips. It’s true. My only experience with renewal patches is seeing them misused by men like Cormac and Kincaid.

“I need to know what I’m doing,” I say. “You’ve been teaching me this so that I don’t hurt anyone, but what I did to Deniel when he attacked me—that could have been worse. I need to understand how alteration works.”

“Fine. I’ll give you an hour, but then I have to check on that array.” But the look on Dante’s face says it’s anything but. He doesn’t want me to see this or understand this or do this. But why? “Maybe your friend will volunteer.”

I’m not imagining the way Erik swallows before he nods. “Sure.”

“Maybe we could start with something smaller and less prone to bleeding?” I suggest.

Dante’s jaw tenses but he bobs his head in agreement, gesturing to the fern he’d been fiddling with. It’s only a plant, but I don’t like the idea.

“I can unwind this,” he says, “or I can change the shape it grows in, make the leaves longer. I can steal strands from another plant and wind

them through it, and create a hybrid."

"Could you make it look like another plant?"

"Sure," he says with a shrug, and as we watch he tugs apart the fern and then carefully adds its strands into a small bush. The plants blur and shift, growing, changing in front of our eyes until the stubby little bush is a baby fern.

"You are possibly the best gardener ever," Erik says, clearly impressed. "Don't tell my brother I said that."

Dante grins despite his earlier foul mood.

"Make it grow," I say.

He runs his hands over a leaf and it blurs, stretching into a long green leaf.

He turns to me. "You try."

My hands tremble a little as I reach for the leaf. I try to focus and see the composition of it, where to slip my fingers, what pieces to manipulate, but I can't.

"Relax," Dante says. He moves behind me and places his hands on my shoulders. It's a strange gesture, but having him there makes me calm.

The plant's composition comes into focus and I concentrate harder until I'm reading it like a code. Each strand woven neatly through, certain threads knit tightly while others are loose. But when I pull on the strands, the plant crumbles into dust.

"Does that make me the worst gardener?" I ask Erik.

"Let's say you don't have a green thumb," he says.

"Try again," Dante urges. "You got the time with it."

"I killed it," I say in a bleak voice.

"Don't look at it that way."

"Is there another way to look at it?"

After a few more tries I manage to get a leaf to stretch. It's only a quarter of an inch, but it boosts my confidence. "I want to see how you alter a human."

"You already saw that," Dante reminds me softly.

"I saw a human unwound," I say. "What good is my alteration ability if I don't know how to use it?"

“I think being able to rip someone’s flesh apart is a pretty good way to use it,” Erik offers.

I shoot him a look. “The more I see outside of a stressful moment, the more I’ll be able to control my alterations when there’s a crisis.”

“So you want to practice on me?” Erik asks.

“Spoken like a true volunteer,” I say, giving him a sweet smile.

“Don’t try to charm me, Adelice Lewys,” he warns, but I already know I’ve won.

“Why don’t you watch for now?” Dante suggests. He reaches for Erik’s arm, but Erik doesn’t extend it.

“Wait, that seems like you’re going to touch me,” he says.

“You aren’t being terribly open-minded,” I tell him.

“Forgive me,” Erik says sarcastically. “I’m attached to my skin. Literally.”

“Never mind, we’ll do it on Ad,” Dante says. “You’ll be able to see as well.”

I don’t hesitate in thrusting my arm out to him. I sink back into my head, trying to clear my mind of distractions, waiting for my own composition to come to life but Erik pushes my hand down.

“Do me,” he commands.

“I guess chivalry isn’t dead,” Dante mutters.

“What was that?” Erik asks.

“Nothing.”

But I can tell from the pinched expression on his face that Erik heard. He doesn’t want to admit why he’s so eager to volunteer, and I don’t want to think about it. About what it means. That Erik is protecting me, because I not only don’t need Erik to protect me, but I also don’t want him to.

I don’t want anyone to.

Erik holds very still as Dante pulls a thin blade from his pocket. But he doesn’t cut him. Instead he traces along the bare flesh of Erik’s wrist. I feel my stomach flip over, but as it does, I see what Dante is doing. He’s tracing the lines of Erik’s weave. A moment later, his fingers slip down and a trickle of blood appears at the spot.

I look to Erik’s face, momentarily abandoning my interest in the procedure. This can’t feel good. His teeth are clenched together but he

gives me the barest of determined nods. He’s putting on a show for me, no doubt.

I shouldn’t have let him volunteer for me.

When Dante’s done, there’s the lightest hint of a scar traveling up Erik’s wrist, but it’s thin and hard to see. I wouldn’t notice it if I wasn’t looking.

“What did you do to me?” Erik asks, examining his hand. There’s some smeared blood on his wrist, but other than that and the small scar, you’d never guess that he’d been altered. It was so fast, so expert.

The thought makes me sick.

Anyone can be changed in an instant.

“I added some of that plant to your DNA,” Dante tells him.

“What?” both Erik and I say in surprise.

“What effect will that have?” I ask.

“He’ll probably turn green and start producing tomatoes.” Dante’s face splits into a full grin.

“Not funny.”

“You two are very gullible,” Dante says. “All I did was stretch your strand and then fuse it back together. That’s why there’s a scar.”

“Oh,” I say in a small voice, but I can tell Erik appreciated the joke.

“Any side effects?” Erik asks.

Dante hesitates but when he answers there’s no two ways about his answer. “No. There won’t be.”

It’s the calm, even voice my father used with me when I was a kid. If I asked if there were monsters in the closet, there weren’t. If I asked if I would be taken away at testing, I wouldn’t. If I asked him if I would make friends at academy, I would. The same even tone used to tell me what I needed to hear. Sometimes he was right about the monsters, but he’d been gambling on some of the others.

Of course there were monsters everywhere in Arras.

But why lie to Erik? What side effects can come from alteration?

“I’m starving,” Erik says. “Being a lab rat takes it out of you. Anyone else interested in food?”

“I’ll join you in a minute,” I hedge, knowing it’s me he’s waiting for. “I want to change first.”

Erik accepts this explanation and heads out of the greenhouse, flexing his wrist a little, like it's sore.

"What did you do?" I ask as soon as he's out of earshot.

Dante opens his palm to reveal a bloody chip of metal and circuits.

"What is that?"

"Tracking chip," he says.

"How did you know it was there?" I ask. I take the chip even though it's covered in blood.

"A guess."

"But they can track our sequences in the mantle," I say, confused. I turn the chip over in my palm, looking for a clue as to why it was there. Why bother when they could call up a personal identifying sequence and remove the individual strands so easily?

"They can track through most of the mantle, but the looms don't see everywhere. There are slubs, irregularities in Arras's weave, much like the ones near the Guild's mines here."

"Are the slubs caused by accidents?"

"There are no accidents in Arras," Dante says in a quiet voice.

No, there aren't, which means any irregularities, any slubs in the weave are man-made. It wouldn't make sense for the Guild to put them there. They wanted total control. So why are they there? "I was tracked," I tell him. "They put a transmitter in my food when I went out on a goodwill tour with Cormac."

"I doubt it's still there," Dante says. "Transmitters like that break down too easily within the body, or pass through altogether. I'm surprised they bothered."

"Why?" I ask.

"Probably to track you more conveniently. Perhaps Cormac didn't want to use the looms, or maybe he wanted to be able to follow your movements throughout the day."

That does sound like Cormac, but why bother with Erik?

"I wonder if they've been tracking him this whole time," I say, feeling more sick every minute.

There's a pause before he answers. "Probably not."

That's not reassuring.

"Do I have one here?" I ask.

Dante reaches for my arm. “I don’t see a scar,” he says.

“Erik had a scar?” How had I not noticed this?

“It was a pinprick. I wouldn’t expect the average person to pick up on it. But altered skin is different. I doubt even Erik knew he had it.”

“But why would he have it?”

“I don’t know, Adelice,” Dante says. “I guess the question I’d be asking if I were you is, how well do you know your friend?”

I don’t know him at all. I only know what he’s told me, what Jost has told me—but still I’m certain of my answer. “He didn’t know. I trust him.”

“Even if he’s lying to you?” Dante asks, wrapping the chip up in a handkerchief and putting it in his pocket.

“He’s not lying,” I say. “He didn’t know it was there.”

“That’s not what I’m talking about,” Dante says in a soft voice. “Your friend sees the strands.”

I knew that. I’d known that since my first training session at the Coventry, when Erik reacted to my proclamation about the fake windows. I’d even seen him grip the strands when we came through the Interface to get to Earth. It wasn’t news to me, and yet I’d never stopped to consider what it meant. “I’m sure lots of men can.”

“The strands of the Interface or the knit of Arras’s weave perhaps, but Erik is hiding something,” Dante muses out loud.

“If you were going to implant a tracking chip in someone, why would you do it?” I ask instead.

Dante hesitates and then looks me directly in the eyes. “There are two reasons I would implant someone with a chip. Because I didn’t want to lose them, or because they were dangerous.”

I don’t like either option. Mostly because even though I trust Erik, I know it’s both.

TWENTY-FOUR

DANTE LOCKS THE GREENHOUSE BEHIND US. I'M not sure why a bunch of plants and potting tools need to be secured, but I know Dante wouldn't tell me even if I asked him. In evening's dim light settings, the glass is black. I trail a finger along a pane, considering something Dante said earlier.

"I wonder how our family got a pass to go," I muse.

Dante chuckles, moving toward the main house. "I should think that's obvious given your ability."

"You said we were made," I remind him. "They didn't choose the original Spinsters for their skills—they had none!"

"But they chose our families based on a list of physical and mental requirements. Decisions were based on potential," Dante says, moving up the path toward the main house as I trail beside him.

"And then they made them into Spinsters," I finish. "But wait, my mother wasn't a Spinster. Or my sister."

"Most genetic abilities skip around in a family," he explains. "Not everyone gets the same eye color or body build, for instance. Remember the footage of the injections and surgeries in the film? It was genetic manipulation."

"So the scientists gave us the gene?" I ask.

"I'd be lying if I said I understood half of it. Weaving is a cultivated recessive gene. Once it was added to a person's genetic composition, it might reveal itself but that wasn't certain. The first crop of Spinsters was very small and very weak. Early on, while the scientists created serums that increased ability, they depended completely on the looms."

Dante claims ignorance, but he's full of information.

"And those that didn't have ability?" I ask.

"They were put into the population to breed more Spinsters."

"And Tailors," I add. "So now the Guild is trying to isolate those genes so that they can replicate them?" I guess.

“It will be much easier for the Guild to have total control over Spinsters. You’re right, Adelice,” he says. “I think they plan to make a dominant gene that can be spliced into handpicked specimens. Then they can decide which girls to grant the ability.”

Girls who are easier to manipulate, I think. Girls who are obedient.

“My grandmother told me families fought the retrieval squads,” I say out loud. “All those women in the film looked eager to join.”

Dante’s mouth thins into a tight line and he tilts his head thoughtfully. “You shouldn’t believe anything you see in a film, Adelice, but I suppose you’re right. The circumstances here were terrible during the war, but I think things changed in Arras.”

“Changed how?” I ask.

“Nations merged, and laws were adjusted to meet everyone’s expectations. Conflicting national identities merged to create a cohesive whole. Those changes, coupled with resentment over having daughters whisked off in the night with little to no expectation of seeing them again. There was an adjustment period,” he tells me.

“How do you know about this?”

“Our family,” he says after a pause. “They took care to chronicle things despite the laws against it.”

“Were they members of the Kairos Agenda?” I ask. My parents had never told me these stories, even though they knew what I was—they kept this information from me.

“Not really.” Pause. I can tell he’s holding something back. “They were pacifists. My parents wanted to live comfortably and easily.”

“Until you showed your abilities?” I ask.

“It wasn’t my parents who asked me to run. They should have,” he says. Pause. “With the increasing amount of propaganda thrown at them, like the film, for instance, most Arras citizens stopped seeing the danger of the Guild’s absolute control. Bombs weren’t being dropped, so people went along with it, even as the laws got stranger and more restrictive. The Guild required everyone to marry and have children that could then be tested for the gene. It’s how Arras wound up with marriage laws and skills testing.”

“So this trait could reveal itself in a male child?”

“I’m living proof,” he says with a flourish.

“Then why not use men at the looms?” I ask. The Guild seemed eager to keep women in small boxes, carefully placed on specific shelves. If men could weave, why not give them the opportunity and keep women even more pressed under their thumbs?

“How powerful would a man with weaving abilities be?” This time he pauses for emphasis. “More powerful than an official without?”

I nod. “That makes sense.”

“And at first glance, there’s no problem. But the war the Guild escaped from was fought by men hungry for power. What if a government was put into place to act on behalf of citizens and a young man demanded power from them because of his ability? It would have been disastrous to the peace the Guild had cultivated.”

“They were no better than those other men,” I say.

“Intentions are fickle things,” Dante says. “I believe the Guild intended all their rules to safeguard against power struggles and war. If they carefully monitored and controlled the female population with a male government, things could be regulated. Boys with weaving ability remained untrained and away from looms.”

“Now the Guild tells us only women can weave.”

“Denying an ability doesn’t make it go away. More boys were born with the gift. Some went away and came back different. Changed,” Dante tells me.

“Is that why so many Tailors fled to Earth?” I ask.

“It’s safer for them here,” Dante says.

“Too bad it’s so much more dangerous for the rest of us with them here,” I say.

“Not every Tailor is evil, Adelice.”

“You aren’t,” I say.

Dante hesitates before he responds to this, running a hand over his cropped brown hair. There’s a pattern to his nervous habits. “I’m not really a Tailor. Not in my heart. I never wanted my skills.”

“Just like I’m not really a Spinster,” I admit.

“Exactly,” he says.

“You can warp, then?” I ask.

“No, that’s a Creweler’s skill,” he says. “I’m powerful, but not as talented as you are.”

“Why?” I ask.

“Good genetics?” He shrugs, giving me an awkward smile.

“So both Spinsters and Tailors need tools like looms to manipulate the weave,” I say.

“No, Tailors can’t work looms,” he reminds me. “Their power is more insidious than that. You know that the true nature of their ability lies in alteration.”

“Tailors alter objects and people physically. Spinsters use looms to weave and embroider.”

“Correct,” Dante says.

“Is that why the Guild is so afraid of Tailors?” I can’t imagine how dangerous that talent could be unchecked. Spinsters can be kept under control by preventing loom access.

“It’s certainly why they control them so stringently. But never forget that there are Tailors who go along with the Guild. We aren’t all bad or evil, but you can’t blindly trust us either,” Dante says. “If you suspect a man—or a boy—of being a Tailor, keep him at arm’s length.”

The warning isn’t as generic as he’s trying to make it sound. He’s telling me to keep one particular boy away, but while Dante may not have a reason to trust Erik, I do. I steer the conversation away from Erik, knowing things could get volatile. “How do they find Tailors? There’s no required testing of boys like there is for girls.”

“Once they understood the true nature of male weaving ability, they started cataloging boys born to parents who had been part of the initial experiments. Many didn’t come back. Cities were segregated so the Guild could attempt to control marriage, ensuring ideal female offspring.”

“They’ve been successful enough at keeping women under their control,” I say, not bothering to hide my distaste.

“Spinsters can be powerful, but they allow themselves to be controlled by the Guild. They resign themselves to patterns in return for privilege.”

Dante clearly doesn’t understand what it feels like to be dragged from your family. I acted out of fear for my safety. I let them cage me in the Coventry for too long because I thought they were in control. I didn’t act because I thought I didn’t have a choice.

“It’s not always easy to accept that you have power,” I say instead. “Especially when the world is dedicated to telling you that you don’t.”

“You’re an exception, Adelice,” Dante says. “And that’s thanks to your parents.”

His words are complimentary. He means them. But his mask slips for a moment, revealing his scars again.

“They understood,” I say, the realization hitting like a sudden gust of wind on a static day. “They knew what I would face, because of you. Because you ran.”

“I felt like half of myself in Arras—always hiding my gift instead of embracing it. Here, I thought I might be able to do something with my skill,” Dante admits.

“How did you find the courage to leave?” I ask.

“Stories,” he answers in a conspiratorial whisper. “Stories are dangerous and useful things.”

TWENTY-FIVE

THE POOL STRETCHES OUT BEFORE ME. A dozen squat white lampposts line the space, their soft glow mirrored in the water below. It's the indoor pool's only light source now that no sun shines through the windows overhead. The water is as smooth as glass, gold-flecked tiles peeking through the cerulean surface. Although it's quiet, I spot a shape moving forward under the water. Erik strokes evenly across the pool, the barest ripple following him. His hair is a golden halo flowing behind him. I wait by the side, surprised by how long he can stay under the water.

His head breaks through, shattering the water's surface. He rubs at his eyes and smiles at me. "Ad, you scared me. What are you doing here?"

"I see you found swimming trunks," I say. I'm not ready to address the real reason that I've come.

"Sort of. I'm using the fishing-village version," he says. His arms perch on the side of the pool, and his eyes are as bright as the brilliant tiles.

I slip my shoes off and roll down my stockings. "And what does this version consist of?"

"Sorry," Erik says, pretending to fan himself. "You're distracting me. What did you say?"

I frown at him, sitting down and dipping my feet into the water. It's warmer than I would have expected.

"When I was kid, working the fishing boats in Saxun, we took off as much of our clothes as possible, without revealing our, uh, *treasure*, and jumped in," he says, his lower lip inching up into a crooked grin.

"You have a treasure?" I say, widening my eyes in feigned innocence.

"You gonna pillage it?" he asks.

"I walked into that one," I admit with a groan.

"Yes," Erik says, "you did."

His finger traces a spot on my calf, leaving a trickle of water on my bare skin, and I swat his hand away.

“That’s one huge scar,” he says. I frown and look to see what he means. A thin, pale line slants across my leg. “Where did you get it?”

“I don’t know,” I say, drawing my knees up and clutching them to my chest. “It’s probably from my retrieval night. They used a claw to pull me out of the escape tunnel. The renewal patch must have left a scar.”

“It shouldn’t have,” Erik says, squinting to get a better look at it. I don’t care about the scar. It’s only a remnant of a past life.

“Erik.” But I stop on his name, searching for the right way to ask him about what Dante told me about the tracking device. It doesn’t take me long to realize there is no right way.

“You’re going to chew off your lip,” Erik warns me, and I relax my mouth into a tight line. “Just ask me.”

“I want you to tell me how you wound up at the Coventry, how you got out of Saxun,” I say. The words jumble into one long exhalation.

“Why?” he prompts, seeming to from the conversation. I know he’s upset. Erik distances himself, asking questions, when he feels cornered.

“I need you to tell me the truth,” I say in a quiet voice. He’ll vanish entirely if I push too hard.

“I can’t,” Erik says.

“Why? I promise it won’t change anything.”

Erik turns from me and stares up at the glittering ceiling. His arms spread wide against the the lip of the pool, revealing the sharp sinews of his upper body, built by years of handling fishing boats. “You can’t promise that. It will change things between us, Adelice. There are things in my past that I’m not proud of—”

“You think I don’t have regrets, too?” I ask. “My father was murdered. My mom is a monster. My sister is in Cormac’s clutches as we speak. And that all happened before I got to the Coventry and started messing things up.”

“This is different. Those things happened *to* you, Ad.” Erik hesitates, pausing to look at me for a fleeting moment before he turns away again. “The things in my past—they’re choices *I made.* I can’t blame anyone else for them.”

“You aren’t going to tell me?” I ask. I swish my feet through the water, watching the bubbles swirl around my toes. I know what he’s hiding, and he has to know that, too. He sees right through my feigned

interest. He knows I want to catch him. If Dante's theory is correct, Erik's secret breaches our trust completely. If he could be honest now, we can rebuild it.

But he doesn't want to.

Neither of us speaks, the silence extending so long that my toes shrivel and pucker in the water. "I know."

"Know what?" Erik asks casually.

"I know that you can see the strands. I know that you can touch them."

"That doesn't necessarily mean anything," Erik says.

"No, I *know* it does, and I'm hoping you respect me enough to tell me what it means." I wait for him to rise to my challenge, but he stays silent.

"I can't take it back once I tell you, Ad," he whispers finally.

"I know that, but I need to hear the truth from you." My voice is a plea, cracking from the pressure of my warring emotions. "Right now I'm betting my imagination is making things worse than they are."

"I doubt it." Erik scratches the top of his head, and pushes out of the pool so he's sitting next to me. Our feet dangle under the surface of the water, dangerously close to one another.

"I left Saxun to pursue a career with the Guild," Erik begins, and I nod to show him I'm listening, that I care about what ever part of his story he's willing to share—as long as there are answers at the end of it.

"I wasn't cut out for fishing."

"The pretty ones never are," I joke, trying to lighten the mood. Erik gives me a small smile but his face stays serious. "What I've never understood is how. How did you get the Guild's attention?"

"I gambled," he said. "They brought a friend of mine into service, which is pretty rare, and when they came to Saxun, I approached a Guild official and told him I had something they wanted."

"Risky," I comment. "What was it?"

Erik takes a deep breath and speaks slowly. This is what he wants to avoid talking about.

"I showed them I could alter," he admits.

Somewhere deep down I had known Dante was right, even if he hadn't tied it up in a neat bow for me. He'd told me to keep Tailors at

arm’s length, and I knew he was talking about Erik, but I didn’t want to believe it.

“You’re a Tailor?” I murmur in a voice so low that I’m not sure Erik can even hear me.

“I am,” Erik says.

My hand flies up and slaps him hard across the cheek before I even consider what I’m doing. “How could you keep that from me?”

“How was I supposed to tell you?” Erik says, rubbing the splotch of red left by my hand.

“It’s pretty easy actually,” I say, dropping my voice to mimic his deeper one. “Adelice, I can manipulate strands like you.”

I know it’s not that easy, but I wish it were.

“I wanted to tell you, but you don’t know everything about Tailors. Do you know what they do to us?” he asks.

Dante told me what they do to Tailors. They take them away like Spinsters, but Tailors are controlled even more tightly. The Guild wipes out their families systematically. They imprisone them and asked them to do things to people—take away their memories, alter their feelings and personalities—I can’t even imagine what else.

“I wanted out of Saxun,” he says. “Doing alterations was my ticket. I didn’t know what I was getting into.”

“Does Jost know?” I ask.

“No,” Erik says quickly. “Ad, aside from other officials and my best friend, Alix, from Saxun, you’re the only person who knows.”

“Not even Maela?”

“You’re the first person I’ve ever told.”

“How did you even discover you could do it?” I ask.

“We don’t have to trade stories about our first time,” he says. “Like so many first experiences, it was an accident. I have no reason to believe the Guild would ever have known about me if I hadn’t approached them. I thought Alix might tell them, but I couldn’t spend my life in Saxun, especially once Alix was gone.”

“So you left, and did what ever they told you to do?” I ask. I’m making it sound more dramatic than it was, but the betrayal is still raw, each new revelation stinging the tender, damaged skin of our relationship. Even worse, I know I’m judging him.

“I left without saying goodbye,” Erik says. “I was young and careless, and it never occurred to me that I might not see my family again. Saxun didn’t have a lot of Spinsters, let alone Tailors. There was no one there to guide me, to explain my skill to me. I thought I was special.”

“You thought you would be worth something to them?” I guess.

Erik nods, a far-off look settling over his face. “I thought I would be somebody. Now I know the best thing I ever did for my family was to leave them like I did.”

“They didn’t go after your family because you volunteered?” I ask.

“Alix helped me get access to a grey market Tailor. New privilege card, new last name—no questions,” he says. “They didn’t go after my family because they didn’t know about them.”

“That’s your face though, right?”

“Changed the name, kept the sexy,” he says.

“Why bother?” I say.

“I didn’t want my family to know where I went,” he says. “I was scared that the Guild would reject me if they knew I was the son of a fisherman.” A dark look passes over his face. “I was being a complete jerk, but it may be the only reason Jost is alive today.”

“I doubt he’d see it that way,” I say. Erik left his family without concern over how they would feel, and his recklessness saved them. The night of my retrieval I only thought of my family and me. I was too selfish to warn them, and I destroyed them. Funny how selfishness comes in shades of destruction and salvation.

“He doesn’t,” Erik admits. “Why do you think he hates me?”

“He doesn’t hate you.”

“He doesn’t like me,” Erik says.

I can’t argue with that.

“You need to tell him,” I say, grabbing Erik’s hand. “He’ll understand.”

“No,” Erik barks. He clutches my hand so tightly my nerves gasp in pain. “Promise me you won’t tell him—that you won’t tell anyone.”

“I promise,” I say, and he releases my hand. “But I still think you should tell him.”

“You don’t know Jost like I do,” Erik says, but the second the words leave his lips, he sighs.

“Did you do the things the Guild asked you to?” I ask, steering our conversation away from Jost.

“Yes,” Erik says. “I always did what they asked. I never saw any reason not to.”

He didn’t see anything wrong with manipulating people’s minds? With unwinding their bodies? “Why did you change your mind?” I ask. I need him to redeem himself. “You told me you were trapped at the Coventry. You helped me escape.”

Erik’s face hints at a smile, but it’s a sad one and he shakes his head. “I get to keep a few secrets.”

“Yes, you do.” I incline my head and meet his eyes. “I’m sorry I slapped you.”

“You’re stronger than you think, Ad,” Erik says, his hand reaching for his cheek.

“I’ll keep that in mind.”

“I definitely didn’t deserve to be slapped though,” Erik says, his voice dropping to a whisper. “There are repercussions for slapping your friends.”

“There are, huh?” I ask, waiting to see what Erik’s idea of a fair punishment for a slap is. His hands stay on the tiled edge of the pool, but he leans in toward me, shrinking the space between us.

And then his arms reach up and pull me down into the pool with him. We plunge into the water, and I struggle frantically, kicking my legs and pushing against Erik’s arms. When we surface, I gasp for air, spluttering a stream of foul-mouthed names at him.

“You’re only a little wet,” Erik says, dropping his hands from my waist.

I throw my arms around his shoulders, clutching at him. “No, idiot, I can’t swim!”

Erik’s head pops back a fraction of an inch to appraise me.

“Not everyone was raised in a fishing village,” I remind him.

“You like water. You love the ocean,” he says.

“I do, but that doesn’t mean I know how to swim. My family didn’t live near the ocean. I doubt even my mom knew—*knows*”—I correct myself—“how to swim. The closest I’ve come to swimming is my bathtub.”

“Your bathtub at the Coventry was huge,” Erik says, a guilty look settling over his face. His arms wrap tightly around my waist and I relax against him, feeling safe enough to enjoy the gentle airy pressure of the water.

“I could touch the bottom of my bathtub,” I say.

“Here,” Erik says, pushing me away from him. I shriek and splash, trying to stop him. “Put your feet down.”

My legs are still stroking against the water in frantic, helpless circles. “Don’t let me go,” I tell him.

He nods, and I relax my legs, surprised when my toes find the smooth grid of the tiled floor. The tension in my chest deflates a little, but I don’t let go of Erik’s arm. I make a mental note to ask my mom if she knows how to swim. She has no reason not to tell me. Another innocent question to fall back on.

“I’m going to teach you how to swim,” Erik says, drawing me back to the moment. “I’ll never forgive myself if you drown.”

“I’m not in the habit of jumping into large bodies of water,” I say, “but I’d like to learn how to swim.”

Erik’s hand squeezes my hip and I rest against him for a moment until I disentangle myself and take a tentative step without his help. Now that I can touch the bottom, my initial panic is subsiding. Still, I don’t go more than a few feet from Erik. He nods encouragingly and stops me when I get too close to the deep end.

After a few minutes I remember I’m still fully dressed and I tiptoe to the end of the pool, careful to keep my head above water. Erik glides toward me, his hands lifting me out of the pool.

“Thank you,” I say, allowing myself to linger a moment on the edge, his hands still low on my hips.

“Don’t worry, Ad,” Erik says, pushing out into the water. “I’ll never let you go.”

TWENTY-SIX

"DANTE TOLD ME TAILORS AREN'T ALL BAD," I say to Erik as we exit the pool complex into the cool night. The air creeps along my damp skin, whistling a chill down into my bones and I clutch my towel tightly.

"We aren't," Erik says. "I personally have a disproportionate amount of badness."

"You talk big, but what can you do?" I challenge him.

"Are you asking me to alter something?" Erik says, stopping in his tracks.

I pause, realizing I've upset him. "Only if you want to."

"What do you want me to alter?" he asks.

"Make something beautiful," I tell him, thinking to add, "without hurting it."

If Dante is telling the truth and alteration can be used for positive ends, I need proof of it. I've only seen it used for destruction on Earth. I used it myself, by accident, to bring down the aeroship and to destroy the factory. It makes me uncomfortable that even my alteration training is focused on one thing: honing my unwinding skills to protect myself in a fight. I want to see something that proves being a Tailor doesn't make me a monster—any more than I already am.

Erik stops me and pulls me toward a manicured bush near the walkway. "Do you know what these are?" he asks.

I shake my head. Despite being pruned, there are no leaves or needles—nothing to indicate what kind of plant it is.

"Rosebushes." Erik reaches into the branches that tangle over one another like a series of veins.

"There are no roses," I say, wishing there were. My desire is fervent and sudden like in the moment before being kissed.

"They've died. These bushes were in bloom when we came to the estate. What happened?"

I shake my head. I have no clue.

“He uses Tailors to bring them in and out of season,” Erik says. His fingers move over the branches so swiftly I can’t quite see what he’s doing. But even though I’ve always suspected there was something special about Erik, seeing him now I’m in awe. The branch in his hands trembles slightly as new leaves burst forth in a shower of green, and as I watch a bud develops from a tight knot into a cocoon bursting with life. The leaves unfold gently, revealing the treasure underneath.

Erik pulls it from the bush and holds it out to me. I manage a small smile. My father used to bring my mother flowers, but no man has ever given me one. I take the rose and press my nose into its soft bloom, inhaling the sweet scent. The rose is snow white, and its petals velvet against my fingers. My eyes peek up at Erik, who is smiling, with his hand still outstretched. There’s a spot of blood on the top of his hand. I drop the rose and grab it.

“You’ve hurt yourself,” I say.

“Every rose has its thorns, Adelice,” he says, pulling it back from me and stooping to retrieve the rose. “It was worth it.”

“Can you show me more?” I ask, gingerly holding the rose to avoid being pricked. “What else can you do?”

“Yes.” Dante’s voice breaks the moment. “What else can you do, Erik?”

Erik’s eyes dart to mine, but I shake my head. I haven’t told Dante anything of my suspicions.

“I’m sorry,” I murmur.

Dante steps forward and regards me with barely concealed fury. “Why apologize to him? He lied to you, Adelice.”

“He wouldn’t be the first person to have lied to me,” I remind Dante.

“You didn’t forgive me quite so quickly if I recall,” Dante says.

“I didn’t know you.”

“And you know him?” Dante asks. “What else haven’t you told her, Erik? What have you done for the Guild? Why were they tracking you?”

“Tracking me?” Erik says. He looks from Dante to me. I give him a tiny nod to confirm it’s true.

“Dante found a tracking chip in your arm.”

“That’s what you were playing at,” Erik says. His voice pitches up an octave. “Whatever you found, I didn’t know it was there. The Guild can’t

track me here. I knew you had an endgame for *practicing* on me."

"And I got the information I needed," Dante confirms. "I suspected you could see the strands. I knew you weren't some simple Guild assistant."

"Congratulations," Erik says. "But I've already told Adelice everything. I have nothing to hide from her."

"You've told her everything you've done?" Dante asks. "And she's still standing beside you?"

"You told me that not all Tailors are bad," I remind him. "We've all done things we'd rather forget. Who Erik is today is what matters."

"Believe what you want," Dante says in a low voice, "but ask him if he would have told you if you hadn't figured it out."

Erik stiffens next to me as though he's bracing for this question, but I already know the answer. Erik only told me because I confronted him. He would have kept his secret his whole life. But what Dante can't understand is that I don't fault Erik for that. There are ghosts I would rather bury than face. I can't blame Erik for feeling the same way.

"You're a hypocrite," I say to Dante. "Tell me the secrets you're hiding."

Dante's jaw twitches but he doesn't open his mouth to answer my question.

"That's what I thought," I say to him. "In the future don't give me advice that you don't plan on following."

I pull Erik's arms, leading him out of the garden and back into the house. My clothes are still wet, but now I feel the heat of anger.

"I'm sorry about that," I blurt out.

"Don't be," Erik says, raising a hand to stop my further apology. "He's looking out for you. I'd be the exact same way if our positions were reversed. He's probably trying to keep you safe."

"By keeping me away from a friend?" I ask. "By trying to turn me against you?"

"Friend, huh?" Erik says, not quite able to keep his lips from turning up into a crooked grin.

"Don't get cocky," I say. "The pickings are slim here."

"I'll take the position however I can get it," Erik says. "And, Ad, don't be too upset with him. If you knew the things I know about Tailors

—the things I’m sure Dante knows—maybe you wouldn’t trust me ei—”

“Stop,” I say, placing a hand on his chest to bring his attention away from his diatribe and back to me. “I trust you, and I don’t care what’s in your past.”

“That’s philanthropic of you,” he says, “but—”

“No!” I say. “Stop trying to convince me otherwise, because you won’t be able to. I know you, Erik Bell. You’ve got a good heart—whether you like it or not.”

Erik thinks on this a moment and then draws me into a hug. “Like it.”

“See?” I say, lingering in the warmth of his arms. “Your choices are getting better every day.”

TWENTY-SEVEN

I TELL MYSELF I HAVE QUESTIONS ONLY she can answer, but in truth, I visit her to stem the waves of guilt that roll through me without warning, brought on by the most innocuous things. The scent of roses drifting through the garden, the sting of hot bathwater, a bite of dry pot roast—they bring her back to me. I don't want to attach the prisoner locked securely in the bowels of the estate with my mother. But no matter how well I understand the situation, my brain is no match for my heart.

My mother's curled up in a ball in the corner of her cell. She doesn't move when I enter. For a moment, I think the worst: that's she dead. And confused feelings swirl up inside me. Anger. Bitterness. Sadness. Relief. I wish I could lean forward and reach out to her. With her eyes closed, she looks peaceful. She's not wearing cosmetics and her hair is clumped around her head, but it's still her. She lifts her head, and the shift reveals a large purple scar running up her neck.

What did the Guild do to her? Can I undo it?

She stares at me without speaking and I see the wheels turning in her head. She's going to play with me, but I won't let her.

"Meria," I say. I can't bring myself to call her Mom after our last meeting.

"Adelice," she murmurs. "Come to check in on your prisoner?"

"You aren't my prisoner," I remind her.

"Sure, your whining didn't land me in here." She sits up. She's thinner than the last time I saw her. Under her threadbare shirt I can see the jut of bones, and how her clothes hang on her. She's all points and angles.

"Are they feeding you?" I ask.

Her lips squash a smirk. "Yes, scraps."

Scraps like she is an animal. No wonder she's so thin.

"I'll make sure you get real meals," I promise her.

"That's so sweet of you." Her voice is flat, as colorless as the walls around us.

"I have some questions for you."

“And I have all the time in the world to answer them.” She blinks slowly.

“Can you swim?” It seems silly and frivolous to ask a starving woman this.

“Are you planning to drown me?”

I plant my hands on my hips and stare down at her. “Do you see any water in here?”

“No, I can’t.” She speaks each word with halting, dramatic emphasis.

“Never mind,” I say. “This was a stupid idea.”

“Your question was stupid.”

“Fine.” My fists ball up as they did when I was a sullen child. If she wants a real question, I have those, too. “How did you get to Earth?”

“Planning to return home?”

“Do you remember?” I ask, bypassing her question.

“Of course I do,” she says. “We took a loophole.”

“Were you running to a loophole on the night I was retrieved?” I ask, abandoning any hope of a casual conversation.

“Your parents really failed you that night,” she says, not answering my question.

“Do you remember?” I ask, unsure I want the answer.

“I know what happened,” she snaps. “The retrieval squad came and you were too stupid to warn your parents. They tried to run. There was a slub in Romen. You would have been safe there, but you didn’t warn them, so they couldn’t escape. You killed your parents.”

Her words sting.

“My parents aren’t dead,” I say. “Benn is. But you’re alive, and so is my biological father.”

“So Dante told you?” she asks. “I wondered if he would. I didn’t think he had the courage.”

“Why didn’t you tell me?”

“Why would I tell you?”

It’s frustrating to sit here and talk with a woman who shares my history and holds the secrets to the past I can’t remember, but who doesn’t see herself as part of it. She looks at her memories from the outside.

“I don’t suppose I’ll be calling him Daddy anytime soon,” I say.

“That child couldn’t be a father,” she says. “He can’t see past himself. He didn’t even realize she was pregnant.”

“You were pregnant?” I prompt.

“Meria was pregnant.” The words are oozed venom on her tongue.

“You are Meria.”

“I am no one,” she says.

And I see the truth of it in the flat deadness of her eyes. I hear the resignation seeping through her voice. I feel it as the words hang between us. It’s true because she believes it.

“Where can I find a loophole?” I can’t keep talking circles around this subject. I can’t listen to my mother denounce me, my family, herself.

“Around,” she says with a shrug.

“That’s so helpful.”

“Don’t you think someone as powerful as your host would know the answer to that question?”

“My host is gone at the moment,” I say. Then it occurs to me that I might be giving her too much information in telling her that Kincaid is away. Maybe it’s a good thing she’s so securely kept.

“And he left you behind?” The question digs at me.

“I’m tired of your games,” I tell her. “I just … just wanted to see you.”

“In the future,” she begins, and my breath hitches, caught on the unexpected hope rising in my chest, “don’t bother.”

It stings, even though I know this is a game. I turn without a goodbye and leave her there. On my way out, I decide:

I’m never going back to her.

*

Erik is at dinner, alone. I’m not hungry, but I knew he would be in the dining room. When Kincaid left to find the Whorl, I expected meals to become less formal. But even though Valery doesn’t join us and Dante rarely does, the kitchen still serves a full five-course meal.

“Do you know anything about loopholes?” I ask Erik, sipping the last of the coffee that was brought with the dessert tray.

“Like bunny ears for tying your shoes?” he asks.

“Yes, of course that’s what I mean,” I say in a flat tone.

“I guess I don’t know then,” Erik says. He hasn’t touched his coffee, so I steal it.

“I can’t believe you drink that stuff,” he says.

“I can’t believe you don’t.” I slurp a long draft of it for emphasis.

“Why?” he asks.

“It hits me right here,” I say, poking my forehead. “Like tiny explosions.”

“No,” he says as he fiddles with my old digifile, barely interested.

“Why didn’t you pawn that?” I ask.

“It’s useless down here,” Erik says, but he doesn’t stop playing with it. “Why did you ask about loopholes?”

“Something my mom said.”

That gets his attention.

“At the risk of sounding like my brother, you know it’s a bad idea to visit her, right?” Erik asks. He abandons the digifile and looks at me.

“I know,” I admit. “But it feels like she’s the only connection I have left.”

“You have me,” Erik says.

“Not what I meant. My last connection to a time when life wasn’t confusing.” My words are all wrong, betraying me. I can’t explain it to him. I barely understand it myself.

“And she told you about loops?” Erik guesses.

I nod, trying to sort my thoughts into coherent strings of words. “Dante called them loopholes. There must be one in the Icebox with that many refugees winding up there. Someone in the grey market must know.”

“Do you even know what a loophole is?”

“No,” I say. “But I have an idea.”

“Well, that’s something,” Erik says.

It’s more than I usually have. “But what now?”

“That’s the easy part. We go to the Icebox.”

Most of the house has retired for the evening. There’s no way to procure a security detail to leave the premises at this hour and Kincaid has left strict instructions that I can’t leave anyway. But thirty minutes later we’re sitting in a crawler. I’ve traded my skirt and blouse for one of

the few practical outfits Kincaid has supplied me with: a flowing silk tunic and close-fitting black trousers with supple black leather boots that reach my knees. There are a few credits crammed in my pocket—the leftovers from the items we pawned upon our arrival here. The Icebox is down through the mountains, and it sprawls around the estate like a metro built on a tributary.

"So you stole a crawler?" I ask.

"I borrowed it," Erik says.

"Without permission," I add.

"Flexible morals," we both say at the same time.

"Jinx," Erik says.

"Uh-oh, bad luck for me," I say.

"Nah," he says. "In Saxun, it means you owe me something."

"That sounds like trouble," I say, unsure I want to be further in Erik's debt. "What do I owe you?"

Erik shoots me a wink from the driver's seat. "I'll think of something. So what now?"

"We figure out …" I pause. I have no idea what we need to figure out next.

"Good plan," he says.

"I'm known for my high-quality planning skills."

*

The grey market is as delightful as I remember. But Erik says nothing when I toss a few credits to a refugee begging on the sidewalk.

"I don't care how he uses it," I say, suddenly self-conscious of my move. "He needs it more than I do."

"I'm not judging you," he says. "He probably does need it more than you do."

He smiles so genuinely then that my insecurity melts, replaced by something much warmer that tugs at me.

Something that forces me to turn away.

"Wait," I say, twisting back toward the opposite direction, returning to the refugee.

"Ma'am." The refugee tips an imaginary hat at me.

“You’re a refugee.” I point to the scrawl of information on his makeshift sign. “How did you get here from Arras?”

The beggar’s eyes dart from me to Erik and back again. “Don’t remember.”

“I promise,” I start, squatting down to him, “we’re only looking for one to use ourselves. We need to go back.”

His eyebrows tilt in surprise and he mumbles a few unintelligible words that sound like oaths.

“Please,” I press, reaching out to touch his hand.

“There’s a depot in the grey market. Find the speakeasy on First,” he says, but he grabs my hand with sudden passion. “You can’t go back. It’s suicide.”

I pull my hand away, managing a smile.

“Come on,” Erik says, offering me his hand. I accept it, thanking the refugee for his information. The man’s face stays gray in the halogen of the fading lighting system. We have enough time to find the bar he’s talking about, on First Avenue, before the streets go dark at curfew.

“Want to grab a drink?” Erik asks, threading my arm around his.

“Erik, you read my mind.”

TWENTY-EIGHT

THE SPEAKEASY IS DARK, LIT BY SMALL solar sconces along the walls. High booths afford their occupants privacy, and a few eyes twitch up to meet my curious gaze as we pass each booth. We both immediately look away, uncomfortable. This isn't the kind of place you come to make friends. Erik's hand presses into my upper arm, shepherding me forward until we find an empty booth near the back. I sit down. Erik slides in, hesitating for a second before he scoots right next to me.

"It's better if we look like we're together," he says.

"Better for who?" I ask, cocking an eyebrow, challenging him to come up with a reasonable response.

"For both of us," he says. "People don't bother couples on dates."

"Ahh," I say with a sigh. "Sure."

"Plus, you make me look good."

I frown, but he hangs an arm casually around my shoulder. He's pretending, but I can't help but realize I like how his arm feels there. Safe, warm.

"What's this?" Erik says. He traces the crook of my elbow.

His fingertips sear my skin, and I gasp, shaking my head, trying to focus. Dark flecks pepper my pale arm around a thin red scratch, but I barely notice them since I'm consumed with the fire scorching under my skin.

"Freckles," I say, pulling my arm away, unsure where the scratch came from.

"Those aren't freckles," Erik says. "Are you being careful during training?"

"I don't remember hurting myself, but it's nothing. It doesn't even hurt," I assure him.

"What'll ya have?" a waitress asks in possibly the-most-bored-tone-ever. She could pass for a stewardess in Arras except her skirt stops too short, revealing more of her lengthy legs than I'm used to. Her head cocks to the side, examining the small platform stage behind her.

“What do you have?” Erik asks.

“Same as everywhere, hon,” she says with a shrug, her eyes still occupied elsewhere. “Gin. Whiskey. Moonshine.”

“Moonshine?” he asks.

“I didn’t make up the name,” she says.

She couldn’t have, I think. She’s probably never seen the moon. I can’t imagine she’s gone exploring past the Interface’s border.

“Gin. Do you have tonic?”

“Sure, sure.” She doesn’t write anything down, but I hear her call out the order to the stubby bartender.

“So what now?” Erik asks, turning his attention back to me. His voice is low.

I take a deep breath. “I’m not sure.”

“You know, your mother was probably toying with you,” Erik says gently.

“I know.” But the words are thick on my tongue. I don’t like thinking of the monster wearing my mother’s face.

The waitress plops down two smudged glasses and asks what else we need.

“There was a place around here,” Erik says. “A loophole. Do you know what happened to it?”

“The refugee shelter? Sure,” she says with a smack of her lips. “It’s gone now.”

“Yes, we assumed that,” Erik says in a measured tone. “Do you know where it was?”

“Yeah, next door, down the stairs. But it got closed up a long time ago.”

“Who closed it?” Erik asks.

“Owner, so far as I know. She still lives there. She rents this place, too. She comes in for a drink now and then, but she keeps to herself.”

“Do you know her name?” I ask.

“Nah, not really my job,” she says, her eyes elsewhere again. “You need anything else?”

“No, thank you,” Erik says.

“If it was next door,” I start, but my thoughts are too jumbled for me to continue speaking. It could still be there, and if the owner is there, we

could ask her. I know Erik is thinking the same things.

“It’s risky,” he says.

He’s right. It’s dangerous to go asking around after the loophole, especially knowing nothing about the owner.

“To almost-solutions,” Erik says, raising his glass. We clink, but I don’t take a long draft like he does. It’s too strong for me. I take a small sip and let it burn my throat before setting the cup back down.

“Strong,” I say with a grimace.

“You didn’t have any dinner,” he reminds me. “You should probably take it easy on that—not everyone can handle liquor like Cormac.”

“I have no desire to drink like Cormac,” I say, but the conversation jogs my memory. I hadn’t eaten dinner because Erik was already done with his and playing with the digifile I’d brought from Arras. I stare at him and he responds by raising an eyebrow.

“The digifile,” I say in a quiet voice. “I’ve always wondered where Enora got that program. The tracking program.”

Erik’s arm drops from my shoulders and he leans away from me for a moment.

“It was you,” I say when he doesn’t speak.

“I’m sorry, Adelice. I should have convinced Enora to drop it when she came to me. If I had done more, she might be alive now.”

“You didn’t have anything to do with her death,” I say, but then it strikes me that might not be true. Erik is a Tailor. A fact I keep forgetting.

“I didn’t,” he assures me, as though he can read my mind. “At that point, things were out of control. I think Cormac suspected me after the State of the Guild.”

“You finally made an impression on him,” I say. Cormac had written Erik off early on during my time at the Coventry.

“Adelice,” Erik says, taking a deep breath, “I worked for Cormac.”

“We all worked for Cormac.”

“No,” he says with emphasis, “I worked for Cormac. He had Tailors all over the coventries, spying on the operations and keeping tabs on Spinsters.”

“And you were keeping tabs on me?” He told me that during our last hour in the Coventry, but I haven’t brought it up since then. Now I wish I had.

“Would you let me off the hook if I said it was really complicated?” he asks.

I look at Erik then, measuring him up. I can appreciate secrets and regrets. I have plenty of my own, and I’ve decided not to let them dictate who I am. Erik deserves the same chance.

“Actually, I would,” I say.

A chaotic mix of instruments starts playing. No, not playing. Warming up. Each musician individually tuning his instrument, filing the air with a clash of rhythm. The solar lights around us dim even lower, and then the band starts to play. It’s nothing like what I expect to hear. The song is vibrant, alive. The notes dip and bounce and a few couples make their way to the small space in front of the stage. Once they’re there, they become as alive as the music. One waves her hands in front of her, kicking her feet out behind her. Her partner watches for a moment and then joins in. Another woman spins away from her lover, her skirt fanning around her. In Arras, we only had slow songs. Elegant, carefully timed waltzes or quiet songs to sway to. Nothing like this.

“Want to try it?” Erik asks.

“I’m not sure I’m that rhythmically gifted,” I admit.

We watch for a few more minutes, and then Erik slides out of the booth and offers his hand to me. I bite my lip, pondering the likelihood that I’ll wind up splayed on the dance floor on my butt. But Erik leans forward and says, “I won’t let you fall.”

I put my hand in his and he pulls me from the booth. He keeps his eyes on me. He doesn’t close his hand over mine, but I feel something weighty in his gaze. It never leaves me. When we get to the floor, his fingers close around my hand and he throws me out with great force. I’m not wearing anything that can fan out or impress anyone, but I’m sort of thankful. At least in pants and boots I can stay on my feet. Erik grins at me, and I narrow my eyes, but then I giggle. I can’t help it. I feel his hand tug on mine and before I know it I roll back into him. My other hand meets his waiting palm without a thought and when we touch everything is electric. Full of life. I pull out of his embrace and spin under his arms. Then I attempt to mimic the woman who’s kicking up her heels.

I fail.

We both spend more time laughing than dancing, but I feel light, like I'm full of air. Like I don't have a care in the world. For a moment, I'm truly happy.

Then the vibrance of the music fades down into a soft rhythm. A woman steps forward and begins to sing. Her voice is low and hoarse, but it's beautiful. She sings of love, of belonging, of loss. My heart gives a thump in my chest. I can relate to this song.

Erik pulls me back to him, and I let my head drop to his shoulder. His arms curve around my back and we sway softly. Neither of us speaks. I think of the night back on Arras when we waltzed in the garden. How his hand felt on the bare skin of my back. The moonlight painting his hair silver.

"Are you feeling okay?" Erik asks softly.

I blush. "Yes. It's warm in here."

"It is and we were really, uh, dancing a minute ago. Do you want to sit?"

I shake my head. It's okay to dance. It's okay to linger in this moment because of the music and the mood. I won't have any excuses once we sit back down.

Erik's hand rests on my shoulder and I curl my arms a bit more tightly around his neck. I know we're both feeling the same thing. I can sense it from him, like the low humming energy of a solar panel. It comes off him in waves—the things we can't say to each other.

Something's changed between us, but it's not until I look up at his face that I understand. I see the curve of his jaw with its trace of stubble. The way his nose bends slightly to the left—not enough to be called crooked but not perfect. For a moment I wish we were in the moonlight so his hair would be silver and his eyes would be gray, and when he looks at me, I see what I feel reflected back. We don't say anything, and I pull away from him, escaping with excuses of needing the powder room.

But I can't escape this for long.

TWENTY-NINE

I STUMBLE INTO THE POWDER ROOM AND splash water on my neck. The mirror reflects a girl with flushed cheeks and tumbling chignon. I pin up my loose hair, but the redness stays on my cheeks.

“Remember who you are,” I whisper to the girl in the mirror. My fingers trace the techprint on my wrist.

No matter what has changed, I can’t do this to Jost. I won’t do it to him. It’s not who I am.

I smooth down my glossy tunic and tug my boots up a bit. The club is warmer when I leave the powder room. More people have found their way inside despite it being well past curfew. A group of men watch me as I cross the dance floor to our booth. They don’t bother hiding their stares, and I realize with a sinking feeling that they’re clad in pressed slacks and vests with rolled-up sleeves and gold pocket watches. The only other person here dressed as smartly as they are is Erik. On Earth only one group of people has access to such stylish clothing and expensive accessories: Sunrunners. Even if they’re here for their own pleasure, they’ve noticed me. I’m not supposed to be off the estate grounds let alone running around in bars.

I slip into the high-backed booth, grateful for the anonymity of the pocked red vinyl sides. “We’ve been spotted.”

“Oh yeah?’ Erik pops his head over the booth and lets out a low whistle.

“How long until this gets back to Dante?” I wonder out loud.

A tumbler of clear liquor slams down on our table and I look up to find the answer to my question.

“That was even faster than I imagined,” Erik mutters.

“So I say to myself, ‘I’m going to check on Adelice. Talk it out, because I’m mature and responsible and so is she,’ and do you know what I found?” Dante asks as he plops into the booth across from us.

“I bet you’re going to tell us,” I say, folding my arms over my chest. I’m not the least bit sorry for leaving the estate.

“Do you actively look for trouble?” Dante asks. “Or are you stupid?”

Erik’s arm pulls away from my shoulder, landing on the table as he leans toward Dante. “We’re not Kincaid’s property, and you would do well to remember that. We had business in the Icebox. That’s all you need to know.”

“Business in the Icebox, huh? Looks to me like you’re drinking gin in a speakeasy,” Dante says.

“Let’s go, Erik.” I scoot across the squeaking vinyl bench, but Dante holds his hand up.

“I’m sorry for what I said in the garden. You have to understand how hard it is for me to trust a Guild-trained Tailor,” Dante says.

“Half of Kincaid’s men were Guild, and you trust them,” I point out.

“That’s not entirely true.” But Dante doesn’t offer to elucidate for us.

“Why wouldn’t I trust Erik?” I ask, my voice growing with the clamor of the music. “He trusts me enough to tell me—”

“Ad,” Erik stops me. “It’s okay. Your father is right.”

“He’s not my father,” I say.

The table falls quiet, the music invading the silence between us. No one knows what to say—least of all me.

“I don’t want to tell you what to do, but if you leave without me, they’ll follow you,” Dante warns. “What did you come here looking for?”

I take a deep breath, willing my words not to shake with rage. “We’re looking for the loophole.”

“The loophole?” Dante repeats slowly.

“My mother told me about it,” I admit. Dante sinks back against the booth and takes a long swig of his drink.

“She’s trying to cause trouble,” Dante says.

“I know that,” I say. “It doesn’t mean I can’t learn anything from her.”

Dante’s eyes swivel to the door and back toward the dance floor. “We need to get out of here.”

“Why should we go anywhere with you?” Erik asks. His hand closes possessively over mine, but I draw it back.

“Because I have something to show you.”

Erik lifts my mink coat for me, and I shrug it over my shoulders. We both know we have to go with Dante. As we exit the speakeasy, my eyes

stay on the ground. I expect my father to drag us straight back to the estate, but instead of leading us out into the quiet, black streets of the grey market, Dante gestures for us to follow him down a narrow alley wedged between buildings.

“I’m not sure I like where this is going,” Erik whispers.

“Where’s your sense of adventure?” I ask, but for once I keep my hand threaded through his.

“Oh, I have not had enough gin for this kind of adventure,” Erik says.

We stop near a full-to-brimming Dumpster, and Dante glances around us. I doubt he an see anyone in the ink-black night, but thankfully that means they can’t see us either. Dante pushes on a stone and it sinks back into the wall as a slab slides over, revealing a hidden door.

“Someone is making a killing building hidden passages,” I mutter.

Inside the entrance it’s dark, but Dante flips on a handlight and starts into the darkness. The handlight provides enough illumination for us to see a few feet in front of us but not much more than that. Once we’ve walked for a few minutes—faithfully following Dante, despite the fact that we have no idea where we’re headed—he stops and shines the light on the wall. He flips open a panel, flicking some switches. A series of solar lights flares to life, dimly lighting the rest of the tunnel. With the lights on, some of my unease dissolves.

“Where are we?” Erik asks. If we’re far enough from the entrance to safely turn on the lights then it must be safe to ask questions.

“You wanted to know what a loophole is,” Dante says. “I’m taking you to one. There’s a crawler up ahead, we’ll take it to the ship.”

Ahead of us the tunnel seems to stretch on for miles. I’m simultaneously glad that I don’t have to walk the whole way and nervous to be back in a crawler. Dante hoists himself into the crawler and turns it on. Erik boosts me into the front seat and then jumps into the back. He leans over my shoulder and pulls a harness strap up over my shoulder.

“Buckle up,” he whispers.

I nod, not bothering to tell him the harness is the only thing convincing me to ride in the crawler.

“You don’t like these things, do you?” Dante asks.

“I do not,” I admit.

He grins at me, but I notice his own harness is buckled. “You aren’t a fan of many vehicles,” he says. “You didn’t like the motocycles either, and something tells me you’re going to like this even less than last time.”

“I am?” I whimper, tightening the straps that hold me in. Erik’s hand comes to rest on my shoulder but it does little to abate my fear. Dante is right. I don’t like being in the open air or the wild momentum of vehicles like this. A motocarriage is a smooth ride and, perhaps more important, it has a roof. But motocycles and crawlers feel out of control. There is nothing to grip, so I focus on Erik’s hand when the crawler lurches forward.

The name *crawler* made sense from the moment I saw the vehicles. They look like metal spiders, after all, and I’ve saw the way they rumbled over the rocky terrain when we went Sunrunning, but now I really understand where they got their name.

The tunnel is rounded, but there’s no road, only broken tracks, and as we progress down the shaft we zip up the side of the concave walls instead of maneuvering the old tracks. Dante drives the crawler farther and farther up the wall, accelerating until my hair is whipping against my face. It’s almost painful, but given that we’re now riding parallel to the tracks below us, I can’t convince my arm to reach up and pull it back. My hands are frozen to the harness, clutching it, but Erik’s hand stays on my shoulder. I focus on it, using its warmth as an anchor.

We rumble back down to the floor, riding over the broken tracks, zooming through the tunnel. We’re moving too fast and my voice won’t carry over the rushing wind, but when Dante finally starts to slow, approaching a cluster of lights, I ask, “What was that?”

“They used this tunnel to shanghai men into slavery on boats during the last century. One second you’re drinking a whiskey, the next second you have an exciting new life at sea. Now we run refugees through it.”

My legs shake as I pull myself out of my bucket seat. I cling to the frame of the crawler and take Dante’s hands when he offers to help me down. I tentatively step over the side, but I can’t bring myself to let go of the bar. Dante reaches up and grips my waist, bringing me to the ground. I wobble a bit, but Erik steadies me when Dante lets go.

“You didn’t like that ride,” Dante says.

“No, I don’t exactly have a fondness for death traps,” I admit.

“That’s funny given how often you throw yourself into dangerous situations,” Erik says. We follow Dante to stairs that take us to a bustling dock. A large glass dome rises over us and through it I can see the Interface. When I look out into the distance, the ocean stretches before me, infinite and black.

Workers run back and forth, shouting over steam that’s blowing in from a round hatch in the side of the dome. Through the hatch, the dock extends. I spy something tethered to the end of it. I make out a door and a couple of windows set into a blue metal wall. Men pass us in a hurry, but even in their haste they stop and raise a fist to their left shoulder, bowing their heads to Dante. He raises his fist in response but doesn’t nod.

A man in a gray jumpsuit rushes past us and skids to a stop. It’s Jax.

“Dante,” Jax says, his face splitting into a grin. He doesn’t welcome him with the same formal greeting as the others; instead the two men grip each other’s arms.

“Is she around?” Dante asks him. “I should probably get this over with.” His eyes flick to us. Nothing like making someone feel welcome.

“Yeah, Falon hates surprises,” Jax says. He pushes his goggles up onto his forehead a bit higher, a smear of grime smearing across his skin as he does it. “Last time I saw her she was checking some passenger manifests.”

“Why is she interested in passenger manifests?” Dante asks, frowning at this bit of information.

“Ask her yourself,” a voice snaps behind us. I turn and find myself face-to-face with a girl. I take a step back as her eyes narrow to focus on my face.

“You,” I say, recognizing her almost immediately. It’s the girl from the night of the crashed aeroship—the one who encouraged Jost and me to make a run for the Icebox.

“I looked for you in the Icebox like I said I would,” she says. “I thought you had disappeared.” There’s an edge of recrimination in her voice.

“Dante found us first, but you’ve found me now,” I say.

“Dante found you, huh?” She looks to him, cocking her head to the side and raising an eyebrow. “You might have mentioned that.”

“Don’t start, Falon,” Dante says, his voice low. “You know our channels are being watched.”

“And what’s his excuse?” she says, pointing to Jax.

“I didn’t need any more info getting out about Adelice. Jax was following orders,” Dante explains.

Falon’s nostrils flair but she turns her attention to me. “Adelice, huh? So you’re the one that’s got half of the Guild in an uproar.”

“Only half? I must be slipping,” I say, giving her a small smile.

She doesn’t return it. “What’s she doing here?”

“I think we should talk in private,” Dante says, taking her by the elbow.

“Don’t start patronizing me, Dante,” she says.

“Don’t force me to.”

“You’re so Arras sometimes. It disgusts me.” She practically spits the insult at him.

I step toward Erik until I feel his hand on my back. Things are getting ugly pretty fast.

“Falon, a word.” Dante reiterates his request. After a pause he adds a hesitant, “Please.”

They walk a few paces off. It’s noisy enough here with the steam and activity that we can’t hear them.

“What was that about?” I ask Jax, who shifts from foot to foot nervously.

“Dante didn’t message us that he was bringing you. He hasn’t been to the dock in weeks,” Jax explains.

“Because of me,” I say with a sigh.

“How did you know Falon?” Erik asks beside me.

“Jost and I ran into her the night we arrived on Earth. She came to see about the ship I took down.” I relate Falon’s warning from that night to Erik.

“You didn’t think to mention this to me?”

“I guess I sort of forgot with everything happening, and you and Jost were fighting.” Even as I make the excuses I know that’s what they are, despite the truth streaking through them.

“Security is tight between things with Kincaid and the Guild. It’s not your fault …” Jax trails off, wiping his palms on his pants.

“I thought you went with the mission,” I say to Jax, recalling what Dante said about Jax not being around.

“Nope, but I’ve been here most of the time,” he says. Dante lied to me about Jax to cover up where he was really going. It’s a good enough reason to be dishonest, but it doesn’t sit well with me.

Falon and Dante are walking toward us, and neither looks happy. Dante tries to slip a hand into Falon’s but she avoids him. He settles for a quick squeeze of her shoulder, but the grim expression stays on his face.

“That explains that,” Erik mutters to me.

“Lover scorned,” I say.

“And then he shows up with a pretty girl after weeks of no contact,” Erik says.

“I’m his daughter,” I remind Erik.

“Do you think she knows that?”

Good point.

The whispers die on our lips as they come closer to us.

“I apologize for my rudeness,” Falon says. She offers her hand to Erik and they exchange formal introductions. “Dante has caught me up on everything.”

“Everything?” I ask, looking at Dante. Has he told her he is my father?

“*Everything*,” Dante says, pressing his lips together.

“Okay, then,” Erik says, breaking the tension. “Can you show us the loophole?”

“We’re making a run in ten minutes. You have good timing, Dante,” Falon says. Her eyes look black in the dim light.

“Not really,” he says. “I caught wind of some intel coming from within Kincaid’s web.”

“Good to know you’re still paying attention,” Falon says. She strides off. With her leather pants and simple black braid she’s intimidating, but we follow her as she exits through the dome’s hole onto the dock.

“Give her a few minutes,” Dante says. “She’ll warm up. She doesn’t like to admit when she’s worried.”

“And she’s been worried about you?” I guess.

“I’ve been preoccupied and with Kincaid hovering over you it’s been even harder to slip out.”

“So Kincaid doesn’t know about this operation?” Erik asks.

Dante takes a deep breath and then slowly shakes his head. “A lot of these people run refugees for him. It provides a cover and a living, but Kincaid doesn’t know about this place or everything our operation does.”

I look around at the workers. It’s a strange mix of people—many our own age, but plenty of older adults. They have belts with tools, and goggles over their eyes or hanging at their necks for easy access. As we pass through the burst of steam that hangs over the dock, I see what’s at the end of it. The doors and windows I spotted are part of a metal box that hangs suspended from a balloon drifting in the air. Great steel ribs circle the envelope, locking in its shape. The aeroship is tethered to the dock by thick ropes. It’s the same type as the one I crashed on our first night here—the one I assumed was Guild.

I whirl on Dante. “Where are we? Who are these people?

Dante spreads his hands wide, gesturing to the bustle of activity around us. “Welcome to the resistance. Adelice, you’re in the heart of the Kairos Agenda.”

THIRTY

DANTE LEADS US ON A SHORT TOUR of the facilities, past instrument panels and groups poring over blueprints.

“What are they working on?” I ask.

“The grid,” Jax says, pointing to the panels. “We’re getting close to self-sufficiency.”

“You’re building a power grid?”

“The only way the Icebox—or any future city on Earth—can exist is with a power source,” Dante says.

“But Kincaid—”

“Is shortsighted,” Dante interrupts me. “He can only think of destroying Arras. He’s never considered what it will take to rebuild Earth after that. If we’re going to repopulate civilization, we’ll need access to power, and the last thing I want is to rely on Kincaid when that day comes.”

“We’re experimenting with an exclusively solar-based system,” Jax tells us. “We don’t have access to coal at this point. That’s still under Kincaid’s control, but I’ve built a photovoltaic array that is entirely dependent on solar energy. It will be easier when we have a power station with permanent arrays, but we’ll have to wait until the Interface comes before we can fully utilize my system.”

Jax and Dante answer more questions about their plans, but I stay silent. Not only is the Agenda alive, it’s growing. Dante and the other revolutionaries aren’t planning for war, they’re preparing for what comes after. As annoyed as I am that Dante hid this from me, I admire his foresight. It’s not something I’m naturally gifted with.

They take us to the aeroship and we step inside it to find a spacious viewing area that overlooks the ocean below us. Outside, a corridor exits onto an open-air deck, with ladders onto the rigid body of the ship. I can’t bring myself to ask the question waiting on my lips as I look around.

“They’re pulling the tethers,” Falon says, coming up to us. “I checked with the pilot and we have a confirmed rivet set up along the gathering

route.”

“How many are coming through?” Dante asks.

“Only one with credentials, but he’s ensured passage for a few others,” Falon says.

“And what are we going to do with them?” Dante asks. “Kincaid is watching the Icebox too closely right now. It will be hard to get them safely established inside.”

“You’ll figure something out,” Falon says, her words more threatening than supportive. She won’t look at Dante, clearly still angry with him over the last few weeks.

“I don’t have the sway,” Dante says, grabbing her arm.

“Since when?” Falon demands.

“Since Kincaid got ahold of her,” Dante tells Falon. Their eyes swivel to me.

I love being in the middle of fights.

“Well, we can’t leave them now. They’re safely in the slub and they’ve been promised passage.”

“They’ll have to stay with the Agenda then, until we can distract Kincaid,” Dante says.

“Kincaid is already distracted,” Falon reminds him.

“But he won’t be for long, and your trick won’t elude him. He’ll be on the lookout for activity.”

“Anyone care to fill us in on what you’re talking about?” Erik asks. I’m glad I’m not the only one who’s having trouble following the conversation.

“Kincaid is on a fool’s errand,” Dante says in a grim voice.

“A fool’s errand?” I repeat, my heart dropping into my stomach.

“The intel on the Whorl was a distraction to get him away from the Icebox,” Falon says. “We needed to be sure that he was busy.”

“Why?” I demand, feeling sick: not only had I pinned my hope on them coming back with the Whorl, but, more important, Jost had as well.

“We have good reason to believe the Whorl is under Guild protection, and we couldn’t look for it with Kincaid nosing around,” Dante tells us.

“Does that mean you know where it is?” I settle into a chair, waiting for answers.

“Not yet, but we’re closing in on it—” Dante says.

“The most important thing”—Falon interrupts him—“is that we get to it first. We can’t risk the Whorl falling into Kincaid’s hands.”

“Why not? Kincaid wants to use it to sever the worlds,” I say. Getting to the Whorl was my best option for escaping the Guild once and for all. Even if Kincaid couldn’t be trusted, he could be used as a resource.

Falon’s head swings to the left and right as she looks to see who’s around, and then she shakes her head. “Kincaid isn’t Agenda.”

I suck in a breath. “Then who is he?”

“That should be obvious,” Falon says.

“Humor me.”

“He’s the bad guy.”

“Then we can’t go back to the estate,” Erik says.

“That’s exactly what you have to do,” Dante says in a rush. “What do you think will happen if you disappear from the estate?”

“You expect us to wait around and pretend we’re on Kincaid’s side?” I ask.

“If you place any value on the Agenda—” Falon begins.

“I don’t even know what the Agenda is planning!” I explode. “Where are we going now? Why should I trust any of you? You never came for us, and Dante’s been keeping secrets from us the whole time.” The questions and accusations flood from me, unleashed in a tidal wave of recrimination.

“I couldn’t tell you about this,” Dante says in a low voice, trying to draw me down from my rage. “It wasn’t safe.”

I wiggle in my seat, folding my arms over my chest. “And now was the right time?”

“No,” Dante admits, “but you were going to get yourself in trouble. You’ve both made that clear.”

“Maybe a little trouble is needed around here,” Erik says. I nod in agreement.

“We have enough trouble without a bunch of kids adding to it,” Falon says.

“Don’t get self-righteous with me,” I say, leaning forward and jabbing a finger in her direction. “I don’t care if Dante is my father, you and I are the same age.”

“You been in a lot of gunfights? Have you watched your best friend die in your arms?” Falon asks.

“I’ve watched more than one friend die,” I seethe. “I’ve seen people I love made into monsters and I’ve escaped Cormac Patton. Let me know when you manage to rip yourself out of the Coventry.”

“So the rumors are true. You aren’t only a Spinster,” Falon says. For the first time since we met, approval glints in her eyes.

“No, I’m the goddamned Creweler,” I say with as much venom as I can muster.

“Well, she certainly has your attitude problem,” Falon says, leaning back in her chair and looking at Dante.

“Don’t get me involved with this,” he says, putting a hand up.

“You got yourself involved when you left me in Arras,” I say, but I jump from my seat and cross to the first door I see. Erik is at my heels, but he doesn’t stop me when I exit into the next corridor.

“Who is he to treat me like that?” I mutter.

“He’s your dad,” Erik says.

I turn and hit his shoulder. “He will never be my father.”

“I know that,” Dante says, closing the door behind him. “I’m not trying to boss you around. I wanted to protect you from this.”

“You had no right to keep this from me,” I say.

“I’m sorry,” Dante says. “I kept it from you at first because it was protocol. I wasn’t about to drop this into your lap, but somewhere along the line, I didn’t want to tell you.”

“Because you don’t trust me,” I accuse.

“No, it’s more than that. I may not have been there when you were born. Arras, I might have a hard time wrapping my head around this—you aren’t the only one struggling with what this means,” Dante says. “And despite all of it– despite the fact that I knew you deserved to know—I couldn’t tell you.”

“Why not?” I demand over my swollen throat. Erik wraps an arm around my shoulder and steadies me, which makes it harder to hold my tears hostage.

“Because—like it or not–you’re my daughter, Adelice.” Dante pauses and dares to bring his eyes up to meet mine. “And I love you.”

He doesn’t offer me any more placation; he quietly exits back to where we left Falon. Erik pulls me into his shoulder and I free my tears, sobbing into his shoulder.

“I don’t know who to trust,” I whisper.

“Me,” he says, rubbing my arm. “And Jost. No matter what, you will always have us.”

I know that, but even as I cry in his arms, the distance between us feels like too much to overcome. It’s a distance we’ve created out of necessity, and if we breach it, I can’t guarantee I won’t lose Erik, but I know one thing.

I will lose Jost.

“Erik, I can’t lose you,” I say. “I can’t lose either of you.”

His arms tighten around me, and for one second I want him to storm the wall we’ve built between us. I want him to help me forget this. But instead he only whispers, “You won’t. I won’t let that happen. I promise I’ll never let you go.”

And even now, wrapped in an embrace, we’re a million miles from one another.

*

We stay on the observation deck, watching the aeroship pass along the Interface. A series of hooks and pulleys built along the ship’s external skeleton grip and gather the strands of the Interface. We’re not flying, we’re crawling across the web of strands. Dante approaches us as the skeleton’s gears and hooks latch and lock, tethering us to the Interface semi-permanently.

“This is a loophole,” Dante says.

As he speaks strands of the Interface rotate violently, curling in on one another in rapid and graceful precision until a long funnel of chaotically woven strands extends in a gentle diagonal toward the ship, opening a few feet from the deck. I take the risk and look up into the mouth of the loophole. It’s hollow as I expected, a perfectly round shaft of strands that stretch and swim in a kaleidoscope of color. My eyes squeeze shut and I listen for the music of the strands. It comes in a surge of violins, the notes

sharp and lingering. This is all I need. I could climb through there and go back. But back to what?

“How did you do this?” I ask.

“Arras doesn’t control every talented person,” Dante says with a shrug.

That’s the understatement of the century.

“You have people on the inside,” I surmise.

“Of course,” Dante says, “a resistance wouldn’t be much good without spies.”

“What do your spies say about me?” I ask, recalling that Falon recognized my name immediately from her intel.

Falon appears at my side. “It’s my job to keep tabs on what’s going on up there. And girl, you’re all over my stream.”

“They put me on the Stream?” The color drains from my face. There’s no way I’ll ever make it back into Arras safely if everyone there is looking for me.

“A stream of information,” Falon assures me. “I have a web of spies, people who pass info to me from inside the coventries and ministry offices.”

“The same people that pass Kincaid info?” I guess. “You sell it to him.”

“Information is good business,” she says. “I can control what Kincaid hears, and use the money he pays me to buy some people off him.”

“Buy people?”

“Refugees don’t come here for free. If they don’t have the credits, they owe their sponsor,” Falon says. I detect a note of disgust in her voice.

“That’s how Valery wound up at the estate,” Dante says.

“Speaking of, how is Deniel?” Falon asks him.

At the mention of his name my stomach constricts as though a wire is coiling tight around it.

Dante hesitates and shakes his head. “Gone.”

“Gone? Where?”

“Not where,” Dante says. “He was unwound.”

“What?” Falon asks, unmistakable anger in her voice.

“He attacked Adelice, tried to alter her. He was a spy,” Dante says.

“A spy?” Falon echoes. “Who authorized his credentials in Arras?”

“I’m not sure,” Dante says.

“Too bad,” Falon says, sighing. “He was talented. I should have known when he asked to go to Kincaid. We could have used a Tailor like him.”

“A crooked Tailor does bad work,” Erik reminds her.

“True. I guess we got lucky,” Falon says.

“How does this work?” I ask, still mesmerized by the tunnel of swirling light and color.

“It’s a convolution of space-time. They’ve twisted the strands of the Interface with those naturally occurring on Earth,” she explains.

“The slub is at the other end,” Dante says.

“Who puts in the slubs?” I ask.

“We make some, but others are pre-existing,” Dante says. “There were slubs in Arras when it was created.”

“We’ve been utilizing this slub for months, but if Deniel was a spy it may have been compromised.”

“What happens if the Guild discover the slub?”

“Sometimes nothing,” Falon says. “They use it to send spies through. Sometimes they send a battalion of Remnants instead, *if* they want us to know they know. Worst-case scenario is Protocol One. They adjust the whole metro.”

My mind flips back to a hazy memory. The night of my retrieval. “They change the citizens’ memories.”

“Yes,” she says. “It’s a combined effort. Spinsters reweave the whole piece, removing the slubs, and meanwhile the Tailors adjust the collective memories of the population. All without ever knowing what the other group is doing. And then the passage is closed. There’s no way for the refugees to get through.”

I turn and stare into the loophole, watching the colors swirl and the light shifting around the twisted strands. It calls to me. But that’s only a space between. Arras isn’t my home anymore, no more than Earth is. If I could, I’d lose myself in the raw beauty, build a life in the very fabric of the universe, among the possibility. But I have plenty holding me here and plenty calling me home. There’s no time for staying in the space in between actions.

“They’re coming,” Falon announces.

I look but see nothing. I shut my eyes and listen. The strands hum and if I strain I can hear the twang of time running tinny through the soft melody of the matter around it. Combined, the sounds are quite lovely, but if I wasn’t paying close attention it would sound like static. I retrain my focus and hear voices. Shadows cast themselves down the convolution of the loophole and a small band of people slide through. There are only five or six of them.

“Evening, Walter, what ya got?” Falon asks, exchanging a salute with the man heading the group.

“Only a few. Five adults. One kid.”

I look closely at the group. I hadn’t seen a child, but then he’s there, clinging to his mother’s leg. He meets my stare, eyes saucer-wide. He’s dressed in a typical academy uniform, but he can’t be too old. He must have started academy this year. I smile at him, but he darts behind his mother’s skirt.

His mother is stoic, looking at us warily. Her dress is worn and I notice that she pulls her thin sweater sleeve up to hide a tear in it. She holds her head high, but I spy a few dark spots by her ear that stretch to her neck. Bruises.

“This is the one with credentials,” Walter says, leading a tall man over to Dante and Falon. The man turns his head so they can observe the hourglass techprint hidden along his hairline.

“What can you do?” Dante asks.

“Me?” the man says. “Nothing. I have intel for Dante.”

Dante doesn’t betray that the man has found him; instead he turns and looks to the woman and child. “And this intel secured your passage for six?”

“I wasn’t leaving her,” the man says. “Not after what’s been done to her. I know what happens to people who come here on credit, but believe me, my intel is worth our passages.”

“Fair enough,” Dante says, “but that still doesn’t explain what you know that’s important enough to grant you passage.”

“That’s for Dante to know,” the man says. He lifts his chin as if to press the point.

“You’re talking to Dante, ole windbag,” Walter calls over.

“Sir.” The man’s stance changes and he bows low, raising his fist to his shoulder. “I apologize. I thought you’d be …”

“Older?” Dante guesses. “I get that a lot.” His eyes flick to mine.

“I need to speak with you privately.”

“You can tell me here,” Dante says.

“No, sir, I can’t,” the man says. “I’m under orders from Alix to tell you alone.”

Dante stiffens at this information, but he inclines his head in agreement and the two return to the empty corridor inside.

“What can that be about?” I wonder out loud, but Erik doesn’t respond. When I turn to repeat the question, there’s a dazed look on his face.

“Erik?” I prompt, touching his arm lightly. “Are you okay?”

“Yeah, I’m fine,” he says, but I notice how he swallows against the words.

Out of the corner of my eye, I spy the female refugee watching us, her son still huddled against her. She shivers in the breeze created by the slow movement of the aeroship.

“Hold on,” I say to Erik.

Approaching the woman slowly, I bend and run a hand over the boy’s finely cropped hair. He smiles at me. I shrug off my coat and move to wrap it around the woman’s shoulders. She steps back and shakes her head.

“I don’t need it,” I insist.

“I couldn’t,” she says simply. “I can’t pay you for it.”

Whatever happened to her in Arras, she’s unwilling to owe other people for favors, but there are going to be a lot of things she can’t pay for on Earth with that attitude. Thanks to Jost, I know the one way to get her to agree.

“I’m not doing it for you,” I tell her. This time she lets me wrap it over her shoulders. Jost taught me a parent’s love trumps everything else, even pride.

The woman swallows hard and mouths, “Thank you.”

I give her a small smile and turn away, tears pricking my eyes.

Warm, scratchy wool falls over my shoulders. “Adelice Lewys, you have a good soul.” There’s a trace of huskiness in the thick words.

I tug the corners of Erik's jacket closed. "So do you, Erik."

He shrugs and looks away, but I grab his hand.

"You do," I say.

Erik opens his mouth to respond, but suddenly a group of men appear on the deck, shouting instructions and dragging the ropes that tether us to the slub in the Interface. They throw the tethers up and stop our progress. I catch Falon's arm as she rushes past us.

"What's happening?" I yell over the din of activity around us.

"The estate is under attack," she calls. "Dante's ordered us back."

She doesn't linger to answer any of the million questions I have. The estate is under attack? Has the Guild come after me? Do Kincaid's men know I am gone? And then one question stops me cold:

What will happen to my mother?

THIRTY-ONE

THE AEROSHIP MOVES TOO SLOWLY FOR MY taste so I pace the length of its deck until Dante appears, with Falon at his side, carrying a stack of vests in his arms. I haven't seen him since Falon informed us what was going on, but as he approaches he lifts a finger to my lips.

I shake my head. "No, I have to know what's going on. Who's attacking the estate?"

"It's a group of Remnants," Dante says. "They're probably after your mother."

"My mother?" I repeat in disbelief.

"A rescue mission?" Falon asks, holding out a vest for me to slip into. "Remnants aren't loyal like that, Dante."

I dare a glance at Dante and his eyes stay cool and distant. He's lying to Falon—and to me—but why?

"Kincaid can't know you're gone," Dante says. "He'll have been alerted to the attack, so we can't waste time. We need to beat him back there."

"We need to get to my mother," I add. No matter what's happened, I can't stomach the idea of her falling back into a Remnant pack.

"Of course," Dante says absently.

"And what exactly is your plan?" Erik asks, examining the pockets of his black vest.

"How are you with ropes?" Dante asks as he glances over the side of the deck.

Nothing about that question is comforting.

"But won't we be walking into an attack?" I ask, taking the offered vest.

"No, we'll be *dropping* into an attack, but it can't be helped. We don't have time." Dante hands a thick black bodysuit to me and then one to Erik. "You'll want to be wearing these."

I can't bring myself to ask why.

“And we’re going to take the aeroship in over the Icebox?” Erik asks. “That’s risky.”

“We don’t have any other choice,” Dante says, his tone growing weary. From the look on Falon’s face, he’s already tried this argument with her.

“We’ll fly Kincaid’s standard as we approach,” Falon explains. “We can only hope that in the chaos, no one looks too closely.”

“It will be fine,” Dante says. “Kincaid isn’t back yet. Jax and I can deal with any problems that arise.”

“I sure hope so,” she responds, but she looks skeptical.

Erik and I change, backs turned to each other. Neither of us speaks, but I’m sure he can hear my heart beating. It’s as loud as a drum, pounding against my chest.

“Zip me up?” I ask, once I’ve shimmied into the tight suit.

Erik pulls my zipper up and then plants a soft kiss on the back of my neck. The world around me stops, strands glimmering, swimming in a vital tangle of life and energy. I live a lifetime in the softness of those lips and the heat of his breath on my skin. I don’t say anything. Instead I shrug on my vest and stride from the room, unable to look at him.

Dante examines my vest and shows me a thin metal carabiner attached to a harness that will hold me to the rope as we rappel. I step into the harness and pull it over my legs. Dante grabs the carabiner. “Fall back.”

I eye him nervously, but allow my weight to shift back. I sway, but my head never hits the floor—Dante grips the carabiner and the harness holds. He grabs my arm and pulls me onto my feet with an approving smile.

“All you have to do is pull this under your leg. One hand here and the other here.” Falon demonstrates gripping the rope above the carabiner and then bringing the rope between her legs. Her other hand grips the rope against her tailbone. “Then push off and fall by slowly letting the rope slide in your hand. Don’t let go though.”

“You make that sound easy,” I say, taking a deep breath and mimicking her demonstration with the rope.

“Don’t overthink it,” she says. “Take these.” She holds out a pair of gloves. “We don’t want to damage your hands.”

“Thank you.” I don’t tell her they’re already damaged—that every bit of me is cracked and broken in some way.

She leans into me, whispering in my ear, “If anything happens, get to the tunnel and find me.”

I nod, but Dante steps between us to appraise my harness one last time.

“We’re here,” he says. No one appears on the deck to throw the tethers, and I look to him, confusion written across my face.

“We can’t stop,” he says. “We don’t know the nature of this situation and we can’t risk the aeroship. It’s the only one the Agenda has.”

Because I destroyed the other one, I realize. I nod my head, trying to look brave, but I’m failing miserably.

Dante leads me to the only side of the deck without a railing. Four ropes are waiting in coiled piles. He yells but his words are caught in the wind. Then he grabs a rope and slings it over the side of the ship. It unfurls in the air, staying anchored to the deck. He pulls the rope between his legs. Positioning his hands, he leans back into the open air and jerks his head as if to say *Join me*. Erik and I look at each other. He winks.

“Any advice?” I ask Jax as we near the ropes.

“Slide fast,” he says, patting me on the shoulder.

I wrap the rope around my thigh and then clip the carabiner around it. My hands grip the rope tightly.

“Go!” Dante shouts over the rush of air around us.

He disappears over the side along with Jax.

“I can’t do this,” I call to Erik.

“You have to,” he says, and then as if to dare me, he lets go, sliding furiously from my side.

I relax back into the wind and close my eyes, feeling the rope in my hands. It’s just a strand, I tell myself as my blood pounds through my veins and into my frenzied heart. The breeze kisses my cheeks and roars in my ears. Retightening my grip, I push off the deck and into the air.

THIRTY-TWO

I'M SUSPENDED IN THE AIR, THE ROPE anchoring me. As I fall back, my body twists until I'm hanging upside down.

So much better.

I'm hovering above Earth, swaying with the forward movement of the aeroship. Using every bit of strength I can muster, I heave my body up until I'm clinging, right side up, to the rope. Taking a deep breath, I relax my fingers for an instant. I plummet several feet before my fingers tighten over the rope and stop my progress.

"Okay," I say to myself—because I'm hanging from a rope, alone in the middle of the air, "you know how it works, now let go."

I have to repeat it several more times before I let myself slide. The effect is instantaneous. I zip down the rope, and despite my gloves and suit the friction burns across my skin, leaving a trail of fire running through my body. Gravity pulls at my hair, loosening it to fly around my face. I dare to look down at the ground hurtling up to meet me. The rope tears at my gloves, but I control my descent until I'm dangling several feet from the ground. The aeroship continues to glide overhead and it pulls me slowly through the air as I try to convince myself to let go and drop the last few feet.

"Took you long enough," Erik calls out.

"I stopped for tea—what took *you* so long?" I respond with a shrug of the shoulders. I can't help feeling a little full of myself at the moment.

"Let go," Erik calls. "I'll catch you."

I stare down at Erik, who's jogging along to keep up with me.

"Ready?" I call, and despite my better judgment, I release my grip on the rope.

It is not an elegant landing. Erik catches me, but he buckles against my weight and we both crash to the ground.

"Way to stick the landing," Dante says, looming over us.

"Shut up and help me," I say.

Once we're on our feet, we survey the situation, discovering we're not far from the estate.

"I sent Jax in," Dante explains. "We shouldn't show up at the same time."

"Let's not sit around talking then," I say. "We've got an estate to save."

*

At first nothing seems wrong, but the closer we get to Kincaid's, the more uneasy I feel. The first sign that something terrible has happened is a hole blasted in the large perimeter fence.

"Explosives." Dante kicks at a pile of debris around the shattered portion of the fence.

"Guild," I murmur.

"It's probably Remnants, but the Guild might not be far behind. Cormac knows that you've been holed up here," Dante says.

I'm not prepared for the scene we stumble upon once we reach the main grounds of the estate. Several of Kincaid's precious statues lie in ruins on the ground, marble heads and arms sown along the brick walkway. As we get closer to the great house we discover something far more disturbing though—bodies.

Kincaid left a skeleton crew behind when the mission went after the Whorl, and it had often felt like we were the only three people left on the estate, but now I see how wrong I was. I trip over the legs of a corpse, falling onto a body covered with thick alteration scars.

"Remnants," Dante says, helping me to my feet.

Most of the other bodies scattered across the grounds are Kincaid's men and a few servants I recognize from mealtimes. My heart leaps into my throat when I spot the corpse of a blond woman, still wearing the face from the play Kincaid put on a few weeks ago. Apparently the Tailors never got around to altering it back.

"It looks like we missed all the action," Erik says, but as if to prove him wrong, a blast booms from the main house, sending showers of brick and tile ricocheting in our direction. Erik throws me to the ground as Dante sprints toward the building.

“He’s not armed,” I cry. “He’s going to get killed.” I rush forward, but Erik grabs my arm to stop me.

“He’ll be fine. He’s got powerful skills at his disposal,” Erik says. “Let’s stick together, Ad. We don’t know what’s going on in there.”

Inside a battle is being waged on Kincaid’s ornate carpets and marbled floors. There’s too much smoke to see who is who and we’re only in the house for a few minutes when Erik pushes me into an alcove previously occupied by a statue. Before I can process what he’s doing, he’s grabbed a Remnant. A crack shatters the air and Erik momentarily loses his grip, but then his finger sinks into the Remnant’s flesh with a wet *split*. The man looses a shrill wail as his shredded skin opens in a torrent of crimson. But Erik doesn’t unwind him. The Remnant turns on his heel to escape, and we rush through the hallway.

“Where’s Dante?” I call to Erik.

“Doesn’t matter. We need to get you out of here,” Erik orders me.

“I’m not leaving him!”

“Ad, the Guild might be after you, but these Rems don’t have the self-control to capture someone,” Erik argues, shoving me behind him until we’re near the stairway that leads to the upstairs guest rooms. But instead of directing me up, Erik reaches out to press a carved face in the woodwork. A panel swings open like the one Deniel pushed me through when he attacked me. I stare at Erik in wonder.

“How—” I start.

“I figured it might come in handy to explore,” Erik shouts over the clamor of gunfire in an adjacent room. “I’m a bad houseguest. I snooped. There’re hidden passages all over this place.”

“Where do they go?” I ask, unwilling to enter the dark passage.

“It doesn’t matter.” Erik pulls me into it, and before I can respond, the panel swings closed behind us. The insulation muffles the sounds of battle and I grope along the walls, wondering what terrors lie hidden in the dark. Erik’s hand closes over mine and he guides me.

Then Erik drops my hand, and suddenly the wall shifts, swinging to reveal another passage. I catch myself against the frame, which is a good thing because behind me a well-lit set of stairs curves down, spiraling toward an unknown destination.

“Sorry,” Erik says, reaching out to steady me. “I’ll go first.”

“I’m not helpless, you know.”

“Never said you were. I just know where the stairs go,” he says.

The stairs empty into the basement of the estate, and I recognize the passage leading to the cell block. My mother is there, and regardless of everything that’s transpired between us since I found her on Earth, my feet fly toward her cell. Erik follows. The familiar buzz of the electrified bars is absent.

“The security system is off,” I whisper. I turn to gauge his thoughts and notice he’s holding his left arm.

“What’s wrong?”

“Nothing,” he says, shifting away from me.

I turn to face him and stare at the blood seeping through his sleeve. “You’re bleeding!”

“That happens when you get shot,” he says. He tries to smile and fails magnificently, the grin faltering into a grimace of pain.

“We need to get you medical help.”

“There are people worse off right now,” he says. “Let’s find your mom and Dante.”

I start to protest, but he pushes past me toward the cell block.

There’s no guard stationed outside. The hair prickles along my scalp like a biological alarm, but the sound of Dante’s voice turns my panic into curiosity even as ice fills my veins. I press against the wall and listen, hoping to understand why he’s here instead of fighting with the rest of Kincaid’s men.

“Meria, I can’t change what they did to you,” he says.

“Don’t pretend to care, Dante. They didn’t take my memories. I know you left me. Left us.”

“I am sorry,” he says.

“Meria might have been once, too. But I don’t care now,” she responds. “Surely you have more important things to worry about than the next prisoner Kincaid is going to execute.”

“I won’t let that happen.”

“Why? I’d kill you if it weren’t for these bars,” she says.

“Would you?”

My mother lets loose a hollow laugh that’s nothing like the bell-like laugh I remember from my childhood. “I’m not Meria. No matter how

much you want me to be. No matter how much she wants me to be. I am not your friend or your lover."

"That doesn't change anything for me," he says.

His shoes click against the floor and I suck in a breath, sure I'm about to be caught. Instead a lock snaps open.

"What are you doing?" Meria asks in a suspicious tone.

"I'm letting you go," he says.

I have to clap my hand over my mouth to keep from screaming.

"You want me to prove I'll kill you?" she says, and I hear the smile in her voice.

"I'm drugging you first," he says.

"This doesn't change anything," she warns him.

"That's not why I'm doing it. Some things don't change no matter what's happened," he says. "Even things that fade with time and distance aren't ever really lost."

Her shrieks grate on my ears and I know what he's done before I hear her body hit the floor. This is my only chance to stop him. I take a deep breath and round the corner. Erik stands silently behind me.

"Ad," Dante says in surprise. He's hovering over her body. She looks like she's sleeping—or worse. Dante looks from me to Erik, his hand running through his hair as he takes in our sudden appearance. "Erik—are you okay?"

"Fine," Erik mutters.

"What are you doing?" I demand, unable to dismiss what he's done to her.

"It's not what it looks like."

"It looks like you drugged her and are planning to drag her into the desert and leave her," I say.

"Okay, then it's exactly what it looks like," he says, a note of confusion in his voice.

"I heard it all," I say. Only some of her words stung, but I still feel their vibration on my skin. She isn't my mother, I remind myself. "You can't let her go. For Arras's sake, it's a war zone out there."

"Which makes it my only chance to get her out without suspicion. I never should have brought her here. Once Kincaid returns he'll blame her for this attack."

“She wants to kill you,” I remind him, slowing down my words. “She wants to kill me.”

“I know.”

“And you’re okay with that?” I ask him.

“I would prefer she didn’t want to kill us,” he says. “Adelice, you don’t understand.”

“I’m trying to,” I say.

“Kincaid has humored me by keeping her here, but after a raid like this there’s no way he’ll keep harboring her.”

“Why does Kincaid care?” I ask. “He can’t supply the precious energy to keep the cell electrocuted anymore? He needs it to put on his sordid plays and watch his films? Even if you drop her off hours from here, sooner or later someone will kill her.

“Why won’t you save her?” I demand. “Alter her back—fix her.”

“You can’t patch in someone else’s soul,” Dante says, his fingers circling his temples. He leans against the disarmed bars that once held my mother captive.

“The Guild has the remains of her strand. They have the remains of all the Remnants’ strands. If we could get to them—”

“There isn’t time for that,” Dante interrupts me. “Whatever happens to her out there can’t be worse than what Kincaid will do to her.”

I touch one of the bars. It’s not dangerous now that the electricity is off. I need something tangible to hold on to. “What if she kills someone else? What then?”

“I can live with that,” he says.

“I can’t.”

“It’s not up to you. You think what the Guild did was bad, but …”

“But?” I press. “What will Kincaid do, make her into a doll to play with?”

“I wish it was something as nice as that,” he says.

“You brought us here. You told us Kincaid was our best option—”

“I told you Kincaid was your *only* option,” he corrects me. “You made a choice, and it brought you here.”

“You brought me here.” I step forward, wagging a finger at him.

“I had no other choice.”

“Really? Or was it simply to satisfy your curiosity?” I ask.

“Partially,” he admits. “But, Ad, things are happening. Kincaid is coming back. They have information.

“Good.”

“I don’t think it is.” Dante hesitates. He stops and lifts my mother onto his shoulder. She hangs limp over him, like a rag doll on a child’s shoulder.

“And why are you telling me this now?” I demand.

“Because Cormac is after you, Adelice, and we don’t have time. We can’t stay here much longer.”

“But what about Jost?” I protest.

“We’ll wait for him, if he comes back with the others.”

“If?” I repeat in a hollow voice.

“When,” Dante says, moving past me toward the corridor. “I can’t explain now. You two need to see to that wound.”

“But I don’t—”

“You can do it.” Dante stops me. “Erik can help you. Tell no one, not even Jost, what you saw tonight.”

He doesn’t bother to wait for our promises.

THIRTY-THREE

WHEN WE PEEK OUT FROM THE BASEMENT, we find the halls quiet. Tattered tapestries hang precariously from the ceiling and the paneled walls are marred with tiny holes, but no one is in sight. In Erik's quarters, I run the faucet until the water is warm, but when I reenter the bedroom, the harsh scent of whiskey prickles my nostrils.

He gestures to the bottle of liquor on the table.

"No, thanks," I say with a shake of my head. "Should you be drinking?

"Disinfecting," he says as he pours some over his bloodied biceps, wincing as it hits his skin. He immediately covers it with the wet washcloth I've dropped on the bed.

"Should I lock this?" I cross to close the door, wanting to be helpful as much as I want to avoid looking at his wound.

"If the attack is over, security will do a sweep. Might as well leave it open or Kincaid's goons will break it down."

"I wish that made me feel better." I force myself to go to him and tentatively lift the cloth to examine his wound. A blob of red blood oozes not far from his muscle.

"Flesh wound," Erik says in a casual voice, but I catch him wince again as the air hits it.

"Is there a bullet in there?" My words are strangled with some unrecognizable emotion. I want to cry and kiss him at the same time.

"It went straight through," he says. "It'll be fine once the bleeding stops."

"I can fix it," I remind him.

"I wasn't going to ask. I could do it myself, but two hands are better than one when patching," Erik says. "If it makes you uncomfortable—"

I stop him. "Walk me through it." Taking a steadying breath, I pour a little whiskey on my fingers. I'm less convinced of its disinfectant powers, but there's no harm in trying. Further inspection reveals an exit wound on the other side of his arm.

“Concentrate,” Erik says. “See the strands.”

It sounds so serious and profound coming from Erik that I giggle, but he balks at my nervous titter and draws his arm away.

“I’m sorry,” I say. “I can do this.”

“Once you stop laughing and see the strands,” Erik begins, a bit sourly. “Draw together the damaged ones and connect them. It’s like the loom, Ad. Fix the hole.”

I close my eyes and focus on the fear pounding its war song in my chest. When I reopen them I can see the strands that weave together to make Erik’s arm and a stream of pulsing red fibers on his biceps calls out to me. I don’t exactly know what I’m doing, but I work at the shrill, off-key notes of the damaged strands until they grow harmonious, knitting together and healing.

“Not bad,” Erik says when I step back to survey my work, the room resolving into a world of physical objects.

Suddenly exhausted from the effort, I drop down on his bed. I roll onto my stomach, clutching the pillow to my chest. He wipes the excess blood from the newly patched wound and takes the ruined washcloths to the bathroom. As he goes, I consider what to say to him about Dante and my mother. I don’t have to talk about it, but I want to. I’m just not sure why. To make myself feel better? To talk through it? Those reasons make sense, but one thing holds me back. An unspoken tension that hangs between Erik and me. Talking about my mother and Dante means I’ll have to talk about the issues that he and I are constantly skirting around.

I mention it anyway.

“It’s not too late to stop him,” Erik says.

“Should I?” I ask, confusion infusing my voice. I know I should stop him, but deep down, I don’t want to. I’m not sure why though.

“No,” Erik says in a firm voice.

“Why?” I ask, wondering how he can be so certain.

“Because he loves her,” he says.

“I know that. But loving someone doesn’t mean you make the best decisions about them,” I point out.

“No. Love can be blinding,” Erik agrees. “But if he believes she’s in danger, he’s already thought through his options. He’s chosen the best one.”

“Maybe someone who can be more objective should be making the decision,” I say.

“Perhaps, but someone who is more objective won’t fight as hard as the person who loves her,” Erik says in a low voice. “One man will step aside when confronted while another will die. If you try to fight him, consider that.”

We aren’t only talking about Dante and my mother anymore.

“He’ll lose her either way,” I murmur.

“Doesn’t mean that he shouldn’t try,” Erik says.

“She loved someone else though. My father, my *uncle* …” I struggle with putting words to my thoughts, trying to sort out my tangled family tree. “It’s so confusing. Dante isn’t my father, not in my heart.”

“I understand,” Erik says.

“My father died for me and my mother,” I say.

“He was a good man,” Erik says. “A better man than I am.”

“You’ve leapt more than once for me—and for your brother.” It’s the first time I let it slip that I know we’re talking about us as much as we’re talking about the convoluted love triangle in my family.

“I’d leap for you again,” Erik says.

I drop my head onto the pillow to avoid his eyes, and at the foot of the bed I spot a book. My book. I reach for it, running my fingers over the green canvas cover.

“Sorry,” Erik says. “You left it here weeks ago. I meant to return it, but …”

He doesn’t finish the thought and I lift my head to look at him, raising an eyebrow.

“I was reading it,” he admits.

“What did you think?” I ask, pulling the book of sonnets closer. I trace the gold-foil *Shakespeare* on the cover.

“I comprehend about half of it,” he says honestly. “But it’s beautiful.”

“I’ll never understand why people don’t write anymore in Arras,” I murmur.

“You don’t?” Erik asks. “It’s easy enough to understand.”

“Do tell,” I challenge him.

“Why aren’t there films anymore? Beyond Stream-approved programming. Why only the *Bulletin* and fashion catalogues?”

I pause and consider this. The insipid forms of art we are permitted in Arras are empty. They lack depth. There is a certain artistry to the design of clothes, the application of makeup, the structure and decor of a building, but it lacks meaning.

“Words,” Erik says.

Of course he’s right. The books in my parents’ cubby. I’d boasted of reading them, but I never considered why they were contraband. Words can tell a story. But they can also convey an idea.

“Words are dangerous,” I say.

Erik nods.

“But they’re also beautiful,” I say, holding the book out to him. “You said so yourself. How can the Guild turn their backs on poetry?”

“They’ve turned their backs on more than that,” Erik says.

I know he’s right, but the realization makes me hate the Guild a little bit more.

Erik drops down beside me and grabs the book. He leafs through it and stops on a particular page. “This is my favorite.”

“Which one?”

“116.”

I shake my head. I hardly have them memorized. “Read it to me.”

A strange look passes over Erik’s face, but he clears his throat. I don’t understand why until he begins to read.

“‘Let me not to the marriage of true minds admit impediments. Love is not love which alters when it alteration finds, or bends with the remover to remove.’” He pauses and dares a look at me.

“Do you like it because it mentions alteration?” I tease, but secretly I hope my cheeks aren’t burning.

“It seems very applicable to our current situation,” he says.

“Continue,” I urge him.

He reads the rest of the sonnet, stumbling a bit as he goes, and yet it slides smoothly off his tongue. The words curl around me, and lull me. When he finishes the final line hangs in the air between us.

“Why is it your favorite?” I ask.

“Because it’s true,” he murmurs. “That’s why Dante took your mother. It’s why your father died for you.”

“Careful, Erik,” I warn him. “You’re in danger of becoming downright sensitive.”

He smiles but the expression doesn’t reach his eyes. “Wouldn’t want that.”

And once again I’ve disarmed the moment, cracked a joke to avoid real conversation. We slip into our familiar banter, abandoning the book, and talking late into the night about plans and futures and strategies, but never about us.

Never us.

THIRTY-FOUR

AT DAWN, ARTIFICIAL LIGHT STREAKS THROUGH THE room, it highlights Erik's face, showing off the curves of his nose, the angle of his cheekbones. He's stunning in his sleep, but soon his eyes flutter, and I turn away, not wanting to be caught staring.

"You look lovely," he murmurs dreamily.

I'm caught off guard. My heart is beating so fast that it aches in my chest as I lie next to him, close enough to touch him, but not daring to. I like that he said it and it's this realization that pushes me up on my side to face him. I stretch my fingers out, searching for the courage to reach across the space between us. Erik catches them and brings my fingertips to his lips. He kisses each softly, and tingles fall down my neck.

"I'm sorry for what she did," he says, keeping my fingers clasped loosely.

"You couldn't have stopped her," I whisper, allowing myself to trace his jawline.

"I should have tried. Your hands are beautiful."

"Not anymore," I say.

"They're more beautiful now. Flaws make them perfect."

He lets my hand fall away as I swallow against the words sitting in my throat. The things I want to say to him—and then the door swings open. The one I left unlocked last night because I hadn't planned to stay here.

"Erik, have you seen Ad?"

I'm still sleepy enough that it takes a second for everything to fall into place. Jost is back, looking tired and road weary, and he has found me on Erik's bed. I don't have to think hard to know what this looks like.

"Never mind," Jost says, stumbling back outside.

I'm off the bed before Erik can respond and I dash into the hall and down the stairs. A breeze brushes past me and I notice that one of the doors to the garden is propped open. I take my chances and walk into the still morning, taking in the destruction wrought the previous day. Jost

stands surveying the scene, with his back to me, and overhead the Interface flashes as though Arras is peering judgmentally down.

“Jost, wait!” I call, but he strides away.

“Hey,” I snap, when I do catch up. I grab him by his arm. As soon as his eyes meet mine, my angry rebukes and excuses seem like too little, too late. He’s already decided I’ve betrayed him, and part of me wonders if I have.

“What, Ad?” he challenges me. “I can’t wait to hear what you have to say about this.”

I stare at him, weighing each possible response. They’re all lacking.

“Don’t tell me you’re speechless,” he says. “I know that can’t be true.”

“Erik and I are friends,” I remind him.

It’s definitely the wrong thing to say.

“Really?” he asks, his voice raw. “Looked like a little more than friends to me.”

“We broke up,” I say. “You left me.”

“To find answers. Answers we both need,” Jost says. “Did you run to Erik right away?”

“I didn’t run to Erik.” But in the back of my mind poetry plays. The flash of Erik’s eyes meeting mine. I didn’t run to Erik, but I found him anyway.

“I was gone a few weeks,” he says. “I’ve come back with nothing and then this. Did you do it to prove me wrong?”

“Prove you wrong?” I repeat. It’s impossible that’s what he said. It’s impossible he thinks that’s what has happened in his absence.

“Yes, I told you we couldn’t risk *that*, so you wanted to prove me wrong. Is that it? Tell me something, Ad, did you choose Erik to see if you could drive us even farther apart or was he the first guy you ran into?”

The accusation cuts through the fragile thread holding me to him.

“So can you still do it? Can you still catch the threads?” he asks. At that moment, I realize that my skill is more important to him than anything else. More important, even, than the fact that he believes I spent the night with Erik. More important than whether we can ever get past this.

The back and forth of the last few months. Feeling so close only to sense a wall between us. My growing friendship with Erik and subsequent guilt. The assumptions and distrust. It all overwhelms the happiness I once felt with Jost. Memories of us, the want I felt for Jost, it's all washed away as my shame shifts to indignation.

"My talent—that's all I am to you, isn't it?"

He stares at me, trying to understand what I'm saying.

"Was I ever more than a Spinster to you?" I ask. "Or did you always see me as a means of revenge?"

His jaw drops open, but he shakes his head. "If you believe that—"

"What am I supposed to believe, Jost?"

"If I made you feel that way, I am sorry," he says, his expression softening a little. "I wanted to get back to the girls. I wanted to make sure we were safe, so we—"

"Could be a family," I cut him off. "But you never once asked me if that's what I wanted. I'm not capable of it. Can't you see that? I'm a danger to them."

"I guess I assumed," he says quietly. "But apparently I assumed too much."

"Don't you dare," I seethe. "Don't you dare make me feel bad because I needed someone to listen to me. Don't you dare, Josten Bell."

"I wouldn't," he says.

"And as for my *skill*"—I spit the word out like it's rancid—"I wish it were gone. Maybe then I wouldn't have to put up with any of you anymore."

"So you'd give up your sister to not have responsibility?" he accuses.

"No, I'm still going to find her. But maybe if I can't warp or weave, then you guys will be forced to do something useful for once."

"I am doing something useful. I've been out there searching for the Whorl so we can get the girls back before it's too late. Before time takes them away from us!" Jost grabs my arm, his fingers squeezing the soft flesh.

"And what good has it done us?" I ask. "We're no closer to saving the girls than we were weeks ago. We've lost nearly two years in Arras, Jost. Two years."

“You think I don’t know that?” he growls. “You think that every second that passes doesn’t remind me that Sebrina is slipping away?”

“I’ve been training,” I say. “I can alter, unwind. Don’t tell me that I’ve done nothing.”

“You have done something,” Jost says. “You’ve become a weapon. Did you fight yesterday? Fulfill your purpose?”

I hate that word—*weapon*. But I hold my ground and don’t miss a beat. Jost won’t win this argument. I won’t let him. “I’m no one’s weapon. No one is using me. I’m not being dragged around looking for a mythic answer to our problems.”

Jost gives me a rueful smile. “Enjoy your pedestal, Ad.”

“You’re the one who put me up there.”

Jost turns to go, but it’s at exactly that moment that Erik appears, dressed only in his jeans. He must have heard me chasing after Jost, which means he’s been listening to us fight.

“The problem isn’t the pedestal, Jost,” Erik says. “It’s that when we fall off, you won’t help us back up. We can’t all live according to your rigid moral standards.”

“So you slept with Adelice,” Jost counters, “to prove me right? To show you’re as good as the dirt you landed in?”

Erik’s eyes meet mine and I see pain in them. “You have it wrong. Nothing happened, but from now on what does happen is between Adelice and me,” Erik says, edging closer to his brother, “because I’m in love with her.”

Well, that’s out in the open.

“You’re in love with yourself. You’ve never cared more about someone else’s happiness than your own. You wanted her so you took her. Like you wanted to leave Saxun, so you did. You never consider anyone else,” Jost accuses.

I know what Erik has gone through. I know he’s struggled with what might have been if he’d stayed in Saxun. *I* know it. But Jost doesn’t. Because Erik and Jost barely talk to each other unless they’re arguing, and I’m sick of it.

“Don’t stop now,” Erik says. “Tell me how I should have stopped what happened in Saxun. Tell me how I could have stuck around and wasted my life fishing. Tell me that I should have stood in the shadows

while you ignored the only good thing you had going instead of falling in love with Adelice."

"You don't know the first thing about love."

"Maybe I don't," Erik admits, "but I know a thing or two about fighting. When are you going to step up and fight for something, little brother? I never held it against you that you didn't share my ambitions. When you came to the Coventry, I didn't judge you for watching and thinking. And when you went after Adelice, I didn't blame you. But there comes a time when you have to figure out what to fight for and *actually* do it."

I might as well not even be here, because their gazes are locked on each other.

"And what do *you* fight for?" Jost asks.

"Adelice," Erik says without hesitation. "You had your chance. I'm not waiting around any longer. I've held back because I felt bad. But this time you lost, and it had nothing to do with me."

"Anyone care what I think?" I ask in a quiet voice.

"No!" they respond in unison without turning to me.

"Fine." I walk away, leaving both boys in the dim glow of halogen, but before I can flee to my quarters, two Sunrunners step into my path.

"We're going to need you to return to your room, miss." A row of stitches runs up the side of one's face. He must have seen some action last night.

"I'm on my way," I tell him, maneuvering around the pair toward the door.

"You too," the man calls to Jost and Erik, interrupting the brothers' heated argument.

"In a minute," Jost responds, not bothering to look at the Sunrunner.

"This estate is on lockdown. Our orders are to shoot anyone who resists us," the Sunrunner warns. "If you have a room, I suggest you go to it."

I wait long enough to see both Erik and Jost slinking back toward their rooms before I disappear into the safety of mine.

THIRTY-FIVE

THE NEXT MORNING MY DOOR IS LOCKED from the outside. I try the windows, but none of them open. I can't even exit to the adjacent sitting room. When my breakfast arrives under heavy guard, I know that I'm Kincaid's prisoner.

"When will we be allowed out?" I ask the guard, who has brought me a plate of cold boiled eggs and dry toast.

"They're sweeping the area. There's been a breach of our perimeter," he says, already moving to leave.

"Tell me something I don't know," I mutter.

The man's eyebrow cocks, but he doesn't say anything else. I manage to stomach the cold egg and toast, if only because I've had little to no food for the past two days. It's definitely not up to Kincaid's standard cuisine, but then again, there's probably no one to cook after the attack.

I try my door after he's left, but it's still locked. I could attempt to alter it, but without having any clue what is waiting on the other side, I decide against it. My alteration skills are dicey at best, and I'm as likely to destroy half of the wall as I am to get the door to open. I'll give it a day before I start to rip the place apart.

Jax arrives with my afternoon meal, and I sigh with relief when I see his friendly face. He brings my plate into the room, closing the door until only a sliver of light is left, so it doesn't lock behind him.

"Jax, thank Arras," I say. "What's going on?"

"Kincaid is furious. He thinks the breach came from the inside," Jax tells me, setting my plate down on my vanity.

"And he's keeping us in lockdown until he figures out who it was," I guess.

"No," Jax says, his face sagging. "He's already decided who it was."

I bite my hand so I won't scream. If Jax is walking around with the other Sunrunners, and I'm locked in my room, that must mean I'm the prime suspect. Or Jost and Erik are.

"Dante's gone," Jax continues. "And so is your mother."

“I know,” I murmur.

“Kincaid thinks you had something to do with it.”

“I didn’t.” I tried to stop him, but I don’t tell Jax this. The less he knows, the less likely he is to get in trouble himself.

“I can’t stick around,” Jax tells me, “but I’m working on something.”

“And I’m supposed to wait?” I demand, balling my fingers up so tightly that my fingernails pinch into the soft skin of my palms.

“You don’t have a choice. I’ll get you out of this, but I need you to listen to me. Don’t eat your dinner.”

“I couldn’t eat if I wanted—”

“Don’t even touch it.” Jax stops me. “Throw it out. Hide it. When we come for you, pretend you are asleep.”

They’re coming for me. I can’t quell the rising panic at this thought. Tonight they’re coming for me. “Who is coming? Why?”

“I can’t stay, but you can trust me,” Jax says, pulling open the cracked door and disappearing. It clicks behind him.

I don’t have any other choice.

*

I stay in bed, the contents of my dinner stashed in a drawer in the vanity. I’m too afraid to move for fear that they’ll come without warning and catch me awake, ruining Jax’s plan. When the lock to my door finally clicks open and feet shuffle across my floor, I squeeze my eyes shut and try to stay still.

“She’s out.” I hear Jax’s voice, which puts me at ease.

“Be sure, I hear she’s dangerous,” another man says.

“I said she’s out. Don’t worry, I’ve got her.” Hands slide under me and lift me up. I’m cradled against Jax’s chest.

“Keep quiet,” he whispers.

The sensation of being carried off is surreal. I can’t open my eyes to see what path he’s taken or where I’m going, but my mind involuntarily guesses each step of the way. The light filtering through my eyelids grows brighter and the air cooler.

“Put her down there.”

“Okay.” Jax squeezes my hand when he lays me back on a metal slab, and I struggle to keep my breathing slow and rhythmic. Where am I? What’s going on?

“You can go,” the other man commands.

“One thing first,” Jax says. A moment later something crashes into the exam table and falls to the floor. My eyes fly open—I’m unable to keep them shut. Jax rushes over and helps me off the table. I have to step over a body when I do it.

“Is he dead?” I ask, staring down at the man.

“I knocked him out,” Jax says. He squats to riffle through the lab coat the man is wearing, pulling a thin plastic card from the man’s pocket.

“What is that?”

“Security clearance,” Jax says. “We don’t have much time.”

I follow him out of the exam room and into one of the corridors of the estate’s lower level. It looks like the hallway that leads to the cells, but I’ve never been here before. Nondescript steel doors line the corridor.

“These are the alteration labs,” Jax explains. We turn left and immediately meet with a set of security doors. Jax holds the security card to the scanner and the doors glide open to allow us entrance.

“Where are we going?” I ask, checking over my shoulder.

Jax doesn’t answer. Instead he pushes open a white door. Privacy screens partially obstruct several hospital beds, and on the near wall, lit boxes display black-and-white images. I step closer to examine them.

“So this is where he makes his toys,” I say, remembering his strange play and the actors adjusted to perfection for our entertainment.

“Not only his toys,” Jax says. He flips a switch on the wall and a light buzzes on behind a bank of mirrors. Only then do I see the images hanging across them. The light casts shadows across the film and a variety of shapes appear before me.

I wander closer and peer at the sheets. “Is this a …?” I let my voice trail into a question.

“A brain,” he confirms.

“And the others?”

“Chest. Hands.” He rattles through a list, pointing to each picture. Some of them are obvious, such as the spindly bones of a hand and foot, but others require concentration to see clearly.

“He uses these to perform the alterations?”

“Tailors use them,” he corrects me.

Tailors, like Dante or myself or Erik.

“X-rays give us a basic pattern to work from. They guide the measurement process,” Jax explains.

“What do you need measurements for?” I ask, my alarm building to a frantic pulse.

“Remember the actress who wanted her face back after the play?” he asks.

I nod.

“A Tailor uses measurements to change someone’s features. It’s not always necessary, but it speeds the work along,” Jax says.

“Why are you showing me this now?” I demand. Being in this room gives me the creeps, and it further reinforces the idea that the Guild is using Tailors in their efforts to map and alter. I had been close to going under the Tailor’s instruments in Arras. I don’t like being so close to them here.

“You didn’t look closely enough,” Jax prompts.

I stare closer but it’s still a mass of murky white and spindly bones. Jax’s long finger trails to the bottom of the X-ray I’m studying and I follow it. There’s a mass of meaningless numbers and codes. Measurements of some sort, I assume, but it’s what’s underneath the gibberish that stands out:

SUBJECT: LEWYS, ADELICE

“This is me?” I ask aloud. I’m not really speaking to him, only trying to wrap my head around what I’m seeing.

“You aren’t the only one,” he murmurs. “You deserve to know what Kincaid had in store for you.”

I scan the next image. Valery. Erik. And the next. Jost.

“How did they get these?” I ask loudly. Jax shushes me.

“They don’t have surveillance in here, do they?”

“Would you keep records of your misdeeds on tape?” he asks. “But it’s still not a good idea to yell.”

Good point.

“I don’t understand where they came from,” I repeat, trying to fit the pieces together. “I never agreed to be mapped.”

“Do you think Kincaid’s the kind to ask? This isn’t the first time Kincaid ordered us to drug you.”

“And you did it? Before now?” My fingers jab at him.

“Dante wanted to see what Kincaid was up to.” Jax spreads his hands apologetically and backs a few steps away from me.

Of course Dante would risk me to learn more about Kincaid. It doesn’t even hurt anymore to realize that, not after his attitude about abandoning my mother. But how had I missed it? The dreamless nights, the world fading from awareness to black to light again. I thought I’d stopped dreaming because I felt safe, but now I realize more sinister machinations were at work. Did someone carry me down here at night without me knowing it? But when I stop to think, I remember the strange dots and scratches on my arm that Erik noticed in the speakeasy, and the silvery scar we discovered at the swimming pool. My torn dressing gown the morning after Jost and I broke up. The strange bruise on my leg that Valery pointed out when she dressed me for the play. The clues have been there. Kincaid’s men weren’t even careful enough to prevent them, and still I hadn’t seen them until now. That didn’t answer the most important question though.

“Why?”

“What?” Jax asks.

“Why would he do this? What’s his endgame?”

“Kincaid is twisted,” he says but there’s discomfort in his voice. He has no more idea than I do. Jax is another cog in Kincaid’s machine, but he feels the creepy, sinister implications in the X-rays, in this room. Whatever Kincaid is up to isn’t benign.

“What else do you do here?” I ask.

“We do the alterations,” Jax says, hesitating a moment. “And this is where Kincaid gets his renewal patch.”

“That’s how he’s still alive, isn’t it?” I ask. “What are these patches?”

“He uses donor threads to keep from aging,” Jax says. “We take the time strands from other people and insert them into Kincaid’s own thread.”

“*Donor* implies willingness,” I mutter.

“There’s nobody more willing than the dead,” Jax says.

I recall the bright time strand I spotted within Kincaid. Was it the one pulled from Deniel after he attacked me? It doesn’t matter. It is despicable and unjustifiable however Kincaid came by it. Is this how Cormac and the other Guild officials stay alive?

“We need to tell Jost and Erik,” I say, heading to the door.

“First, we have to take care of something more important,” Jax says. He gestures to the privacy screen, and my heart sinks into my stomach. He pushes it to the side, revealing Dante, unconscious, lying on a table. An IV runs from his arm, and a mask regulates his breathing.

“What happened to him?” I breathe.

“He’s sedated,” Jax tells me.

“Wake him up,” I cry.

“It’s not that easy—”

“Wake him up!”

Jax fumbles through the cabinets and emerges with a vial of liquid. He sucks the medicine into a long syringe and takes a deep breath.

“Hold his arms,” Jax orders me. I do as I’m told. Before I can ask him what he’s planning to do, Jax slams the syringe into the center of Dante’s chest. The effect is instantaneous. Dante’s eyes fly open and he gasps against the mask covering his face. I pull it off him and he stares at me in confusion.

“It’s okay,” I say.

“Ad?” It’s the only word I can make out. Dante’s words are confused, a jumble of consonants and vowels.

“We need to go,” Jax says. He offers Dante an arm, while I gently pull the IV needle from his arm. “We’ll explain everything in a minute.”

“We need to get to Erik and Jost,” I say, wrapping Dante’s other arm over my shoulder to help steady him.

Dante pushes us away. “I can walk.”

Jax and I exchange a concerned look, but we let Dante walk. I stay close to him in case he stumbles, but he doesn’t head for the door. He trips his way to the next privacy screen.

“There’s someone else in here,” Dante says. “I got glimpses between doses.”

“Who?” I ask, moving to push away the screen, my heart pounding in my chest.

“It’s Valery,” Dante says, beginning to tremble.

“The drugs are messing with his system,” Jax says, grabbing a scratchy white blanket to place over Dante’s shoulders.

Valery lies sedated behind the other screen. A bag drips nutrition into her arm, but from the look of her skeletal form, she’s been here awhile.

“How long has she been here?” I wonder out loud. I can tell from the sallowness of her complexion that this is more than a couple days of sedation. I barely recall Kincaid mentioning Valery was going on the mission.

“She never left the estate,” Jax says in disgust. “Kincaid lied to us. It took me a few days to piece together what was going on down here, and then I had to convince someone to let me in on the job. Kincaid doesn’t trust me, he knows I’m too close to Dante.”

“I’ll get her. She won’t be able to walk on her own.”

“And then what?” I ask, beginning to feel the familiar panic crawling through my skin.

“You need to get your friends and run,” Jax says.

“They’ve got the whole place on lockdown,” I argue. “There’s no way we’re getting out of here.”

“Don’t worry about that,” Jax says. Despite the seriousness of the situation, he winks at me.

“Jax is an expert at causing a commotion,” Dante says weakly.

“You’re going to distract them?” I guess. “How do you plan on distracting Kincaid’s whole security force?”

“With a very big boom.”

“And then what?” I ask. “Where will we go? We have no—”

Dante holds up a shaking hand to stop me. “We do have a plan. I know where the Whorl is.”

“What?” I ask.

“The Whorl is on Alcatraz Island,” Dante says in a small voice. “That was the intel the man who came through the loophole had. Kincaid doesn’t know, but we’ll have to move quickly. We’ll need supplies—a raft and dry suits. This place won’t be easy to get to.”

“I’ll take care of it,” Jax says. “You guys worry about getting everyone ready to go and I’ll make sure there’s a crawler waiting with what you’ll need.”

“Get ahold of Falon. Tell her what’s happened and where we’re heading.” Even in his weakened condition, Dante is coherent giving orders and making plans.

“What about Valery?” I ask. “We can’t leave her here.”

“Jax will take care of her. Get her clothes and get her to the crawler.” Dante looks to Jax for confirmation, and Jax nods.

“I’ll message Falon from Valery’s quarters,” Jax says.

I look at Dante and his face is determined as he gives one final order: “Let’s get the hell out of here.”

*

I rap so quietly on Erik’s door that he doesn’t respond so I knock again. When he answers his door, his shirt is untucked and his hair tousled but I can tell he hasn’t been sleeping.

“Can I come in?” I ask. It’s my job to convince both Erik and Jost to come, something I plan to approach with separate tactics, while Jax works on a distraction and gets Val and Dante out and into a crawler. The plan is straight and to the point, so I’m positive it will go all wrong.

Erik looks flustered to see me, which is unusual, but we haven’t talked about what he said to Jost. If he meant it. Or how I feel about it. Because I’m not sure yet. I duck in under his arm and push the door closed.

“I have something I need to tell you,” I start, but before I can continue Erik leans into me, resting his arm on the door behind me, and suddenly I can’t seem to breathe. He’s so close to me that I can see the golden flecks around his irises, like stars swimming in the ocean.

“We’ve needed to talk for a while,” he murmurs.

This close I can see that his lower lip is slightly fuller than the top one. I want him to lean closer. In this moment, I forget about Kincaid and Valery and Jost. I want him to kiss me.

Instead I push him away. Erik sighs and drops onto his bed, leaning his head into his hand. I’m immensely jealous of his hand in this

moment. How he runs it through the mess of his hair.

“Not about us,” I stop him. “There’s trouble. More trouble than I can explain right now.”

“Well?” he says expectantly.

“We have to get out of here. I’ll explain later.”

“Explain now.” He grabs my wrist to stop my frantic pacing.

I gawk at him and pull away. Before I can respond to Erik’s demand, the door bursts open and a man stumbles in. At first I think we’ve been discovered, but then Jost appears in the doorway behind him.

So this is how it ends. The betrayal numbs my body into paralysis.

But Jost surprises me, releasing his fist. It makes hard contact with the Sunrunner’s jaw. He bounces back but doesn’t fall and soon he’s tussling with Jost. They wrestle each other to the floor and I jump up, looking for a way to help without accidentally ripping apart the room or anyone in it.

The Sunrunner pins Jost to the floor, his arm coiled around his neck.

“Little help here,” Jost gasps against the pressure.

I whip around, looking for something to attack the Sunrunner with, and as I do, the room spins to life, full of purple and gold and crimson. I could use my alteration abilities.

“Do it,” Jost croaks.

Before I can, Erik jumps in, surprising the Sunrunner enough that he loses his grip on Jost, who reverses the hold, pinning the other man to the ground as Erik unceremoniously cracks the medicinal bottle of whiskey over our attacker’s head, knocking him out.

“What’s going on?” Jost demands, his breath coming in heavy, fast pants.

I look to Erik, but neither of us speaks. I hadn’t planned on convincing both of them to come at the same time. That would require a miracle.

“Do you know what he was going to do to you? I got to know Burris on the mission,” Jost continues, pointing to the man on the floor. “Kincaid doesn’t send Burris to bring you tea. Trust me. He sends Burris to kill you—or worse.”

“Why would anyone want to kill us?” Erik asks in a cool voice.

“That’s what I’m asking you,” Jost says.

“Why don’t you ask Burris?” Erik says, crossing his arms defensively, abandoning the brief brotherly camaraderie.

“Because he’s not currently very talkative,” Jost says, “and because he already told me.”

“Told you what?” I ask.

“That he caught a spy and was going after her,” he says. “I assume he means you.”

My heart thumps when he looks at me. “We have to get out of here.”

“And go where?” Jost asks. “Kincaid will be after you.”

“We know where the Whorl is,” I say, trying to keep my head clear and my words rational despite the trying circumstances I’ve found myself in this evening, but when I finish relating the night’s events, neither of them acts surprised. Erik places an arm around my shoulder, but I shrug it off, aware of Jost’s tensed jaw.

“Why are we still here?” Jost asks, his gaze glued to the floor. “If Dante knows where the Whorl is, we need to go.”

“We have to wait for Jax. We can’t get past security without a distraction,” I tell him. Our eyes meet for a moment before I look away, confusion blooming in my chest.

“This ought to be good,” Erik mutters, “and by good, I mean very, very bad.”

THIRTY-SIX

JAX'S DISTRACTION COMES IN THE FORM OF blowing up a garage that sits far enough from the main house that we aren't in imminent danger but close enough that the security force acts swiftly, giving us the opportunity to slip out of an entrance at the back of the house. As smoke pours from the wreckage, we flee the estate in the stolen crawler, Dante and Valery tucked safely inside with a bag of food and water. Jax has kept his word—everyone is too busy to see us go and the gates are unattended. I don't look back at Kincaid's playground. There's nothing left for me there. Jost drives north, following a rough map Dante has drafted.

"Hopefully, the men notice I'm gone first," Jost says, his hands white knuckled on the steering wheel. "They'll probably assume I'm out somewhere killing Erik. It's actually a fantastic alibi."

"Yeah," Dante says, from the backseat. "Because it's very believable."

"To be clear," Erik says, "you probably won't kill me though?"

"The night is young."

"Let's get to the island before we kill each other," Dante suggests in a mild tone that grows weaker as the adrenaline wears off.

We collapse into silence after this, the somewhat good-natured threat still hanging in the air. Although it's clear now that everyone knows about the drama between Jost, Erik, and I.

Now that we're off the estate, the road grows wild the farther we get from the inhabited Icebox. I turn around, hoping to stem the rolling nausea from our ride. "Dante," I call, leaning my chin against my seat, "do you think Jax will be okay?"

We'd left him at the estate to deal with the fallout of the explosion. Dante grins. "He'll be fine. He's headed straight to the Agenda to let them know what's happened so we can rendezvous with Falon later."

"That night when I caught you in the cells," I say, hoping this question doesn't destroy Dante's mood, "did you get my mother out?" I've been wondering since I found him strapped to the exam table, not knowing when or how he'd been taken.

Dante swallows hard and nods, but he doesn’t give me any details.

Her freedom means she’ll come after me again, but I have new enemies to worry about. The woman I knew as my mother is already dead. Even if I alter her I don’t think I can erase what’s happened. Would she remember what she’s done? The people she’s killed? I’ve spent enough nights contemplating how my own actions have led to deaths: Enora, my father, the nameless threads I ripped in cold blood. I was passive in those actions but I feel their blood on my hands like the sticky, black substance that coated my feet on the night of my retrieval. I can’t dismiss the past, it lives in my head and infects me. Even with her soul back, her morality intact, would my mother be able to calm the bitter truth of what she’s done?

And I know one thing for certain, my mother would want me to push forward, to find the Whorl, to get to Amie. I haven’t given up on that yet. I won’t let Arras and Earth be severed without reaching Amie first and removing her from Cormac’s control.

But Loricel’s words *the good of the many* whisper in my mind. I can’t sacrifice a world for a sister as much as I can’t sacrifice an opportunity for my mother. If I did, the groans of the dead would haunt me, calling to me, slowly driving me insane. Loricel asked me to think about my choices. At a loom to help others she made decisions. I have no loom now—merely passion swelling up inside me like a flooding dam ready to burst into action. Sometimes the only way to serve the greater good is to fight.

We pass along the coast in silence, weaving through abandoned metros, past service stations crawling with vines, tiny saltbox homes, and an endless series of unlit relics. No signs of life appear. I wonder what lies at the heart of the Interface. Someday, when this is over, I will explore and rebuild Earth. If I find nothing, I’ll build my own world.

I look behind me. Erik rides silently. Even if Jost knows nothing happened between Erik and me, it’s meaningless. I didn’t kiss Erik, but I wanted to. I ripped a deeper void between them than can ever be patched.

Erik didn’t kiss me that night either, because he loves his brother despite everything that’s passed between them.

Now that we’ve driven beyond the Interface’s boundary, overhead a sprinkling of stars peek out and the moon perches in the gray, night sky.

On Arras, a Spinster moves the time along, determining how the light will fade, whether the sunset will be orange or rose or purple. She places a false moon in the sky. Earth is a world born from nothing but potential. I think of the books in Kincaid's library. The ones that containe theories on Earth's origin, positing everything from a cataclysmic spasm in the universe to a creator placing it here, placing us here. I've seen in Arras what comes of the idea of a creator; I like the idea of randomness better. That we are born of infinite possibility and fade back into the fabric of the universe to feed new life. That the moon perches overhead simply because, and nothing more. I don't want to live my life at the hands of another, I want to live my life now, deciding my own fate.

Whatever lies ahead of us on Alcatraz could change everything, but I choose the path of self-determination. Whether we find the Whorl—if we accomplish the separation of the worlds—I will listen to myself. My fingers find the techprint on my wrist.

I'm not meant to remember who I am. I have to *discover* who I am.

*

Alcatraz Island is full of men and women with scarred skin that shimmers and shifts. It's not the decrepit old facility we expected. It's full of white light that bounces off metal tables and blank walls. There are no bars on the cells, only thick glass. The prisoners beat against it, lick it, scratch at it, leaving
bloody streaks from deeply torn nails behind, but we can't hear them. We hear only a low hum from the energy powering this place. It must take so much of it, I think. The hum grows louder until it's pulsing thick in my ears and I can feel it there in my head, under my skin, behind my eyes. I try to shake it out but it won't fade. I tug on Dante's hand. He's closest to me, but he keeps walking forward, down a hall toward the black doors at the other end. He can't hear me in here either. I cry out, but I can't hear myself over the pounding in my ears. Around us more Remnants gather at the transparent walls of their cells, and they start thumping against the glass. Their faces constrict into masks of ferocious concentration. Their hands are balled in fists. I don't have to hear them, because I can feel it.

The ground beneath me shakes and concrete pillars spit dust over us as though the prison will collapse at any moment.

I run to Jost and pull on his arm, warning him to hurry, that they're going to break loose. But when he turns around his hair grows lighter, and he morphs into Erik. I scream.

"Ad!" Dante's call startles me from the dream and I arch in my seat, running a hand over my bleary eyes.

"You were asleep," Erik says. He's grabbed on to my seat, clutching it for balance.

"It was a nightmare," I murmur, my mouth full of cotton.

"No one here to drug you," Erik says with a wry smile, but it's too soon to laugh about Kincaid's betrayal.

"You want to stop for a second?" Dante asks, pulling Erik back in his seat. "Walk around?"

I shake my head. I want to put distance between Kincaid and the horrors of the estate. I want to move forward. More than anything I want to get to the Whorl—my future—and get on with it. I'm not eager to have total control of Arras, but I can't let someone else have it either. Certainly not Kincaid. The Whorl will give me a chance to right so many of my mistakes.

The world outside the crawler is dark with night, and above us the sky is black and full of stars and milky bands of light. The ocean laps against the road, and I can see where parts of the pavement have crumbled and fallen into the sea.

"You think that bridge is safe?" Erik asks, his focus ahead on the faded burgundy bridge in the distance.

"Probably not," Jost answers. "But we don't have to cross it anyway."

He takes one hand off the wheel and points outside to something planted firmly in the ocean—a towered compound rising up from the water. The familiarity of the stone towers unnerves me.

"What is that?" I breathe.

"Alcatraz Island," Dante says. "It was a prison before the Exodus. The Guild keeps the Whorl there now. That man who came through the loophole—he found out about it."

"After all these years," I say, staring across the ocean, "you've found it."

Jost slows the crawler when we reach a patch of shoreline that's intact. It's full of rocks and long, winding grass.

"High tide," Erik informs me, helping me out of the back of the crawler.

"How do you know?" I ask.

"Fisherman's son," he reminds me. "The water has risen as close to the shore as possible. When the tide goes back out, the shore will stretch farther out."

"What's underneath it?"

"The water? Rocks and seaweed and seashells."

"Seashells?"

"You've never seen a seashell?"

"No, I have. On the Stream, at least. But I've never seen the ocean until now." The fake one programmed into my window screens at the Coventry don't count.

"I never taught you to swim." Erik's words are an apology as he sweeps a finger along my jaw.

I bite the inside of my cheek, daring to say the thing I shouldn't. "You will."

I wander down to the fringe of the water with Erik, wishing it was daylight and warm enough to slip my toes in and feel the sea. The water goes on forever, at moments peaceful and then bursting with a wave that washes down with mighty force, nearly reaching our feet.

"It's beautiful," I murmur.

"I ran from my village," Erik whispers, "but I never stopped missing it."

"Was it like this? The Endless Sea?"

"Yes and no. It was calmer. Why control the ocean if you can't *control* it?" he points out.

"Why control it at all?" I wonder aloud as I stare at the magnificent, powerful waves. I can imagine how lovely the ocean's strands would feel on a loom, strong and slick and ancient, but they can't compare to standing here, looking out and never seeing where it ends.

"Mind giving us a hand?" Jost calls, and I turn to see he's spread a thick plastic sheet on the ground.

"What's that?"

“Our raft. I mean, if we’re still going,” he replies, pain edging into his words. Is that what it will always be like? Hurting him to exchange a few words with Erik? Would it be better to hurt Erik by ignoring him to spare Jost? Behind me the ocean laps on, beating against the shore in rhythmic bursts, reminding me that I’m small and insignificant.

Erik and Jost set to work, inflating the raft until it’s a large boat that, to be honest, looks a little flimsy considering we have to get out past these waves.

“How will we get out there?” I ask, staring at the frail raft.

Jost and Erik exchange a look, a first since we fled the estate. The fact is that the ocean is their territory and there’s no sense denying that now.

“We’ll push you out,” Erik says.

“How?” Valery asks, alarmed. She’s been quiet most of the trip, but I don’t blame her for speaking up now.

“You’ll sit in the raft and we’ll swim it out,” he replies.

“Is that a good idea?”

“I’ll help,” Dante volunteers.

“You spend much time in the ocean?” Jost asks.

Dante shakes his head. He’s their equal in size and strength, but even I know that doesn’t mean he has the skill to navigate this water.

“We can do this,” Erik assures us. “Fisherman’s sons, remember?”

I swallow and force a nod. I like this idea less and less, but I have to trust that they have the skill to do it. Meanwhile Dante passes foam suits to us.

“Put this on,” he orders. “That water is cold enough to kill you if you go in.”

If we go in, I think, I’m not worried about the cold. But I struggle to get my suit on. In the end, Valery and I help each other with the difficult zippers on the thick, fitted suits. Jost and Erik have theirs on before we’ve sealed the sleeves, making them waterproof. When the suit is on, it flexes enough for me to move, but it’s tight.

“And once we’re out there?” I ask, forcing myself to think ahead. I don’t like the idea of sitting in a raft while two of the people I care most for in the world drown.

“Paddle,” Jost says, swinging a long stick up for me to see.

I eye it apprehensively. “You want me to do what with that?”

Jost swings it in a small circle, dipping the flat end of it and then raising it back up for a split second before dipping it through the air once more. “I’ll call beats from behind. Right and left. If we’re going to get across this current, we’ll need to time things well.”

Behind him the water smashes hard against the rocks, each wave unpredictable. How are we supposed to get across that?

“We have four paddles,” Jost says. “Ad and Dante will each take a side in the front, and we’ll take the rear once we’ve got you over the surf.”

“And me?” Valery asks, her voice lacking the miffed tone she usually takes when she’s left out.

“You sit in the middle and look pretty,” Erik says.

She gives him a scathing look, but lets him help her into the center of the raft.

“What if we go over?” I ask. The wind has picked up and it bites against my face.

“If you go over, we can’t help you,” Jost says. “Once we’re out there, you’re gone. This current is fast.”

I find myself looking for a bridge or a boat or something that isn’t going to result in my drowning, but I know we don’t have time. Since the tide is still high, Dante and I wade in a few feet behind the raft. A wave crashes down across my ankles and I’m surprised at its force. I can’t imagine how we’ll ever get past the surf.

Erik’s arm slides around my waist, taking me by surprise. He steadies me as I climb into the raft, and hands me a paddle.

I must look nervous because he leans down to my ear. “Dip it in when he says *right*. As soon as we get past the big waves, I’ll be there behind you.”

I nod, which makes my ear brush against his lips.

Jost and Erik push the raft hard against the tide and we catch a large wave. For a moment Jost’s head disappears below the surface, and a scream rises in my throat but he reappears, pushing us harder. I don’t like this, especially when the raft catches a wave and we ride up, threatening to tip over. My nerves twists with each surge of water, but the brothers get us past them. Once the rolling tidal waves are behind us, they both

hoist themselves over the side and onto the raft. They have to be freezing, even in their suits, but they set to paddling immediately.

The current tries to push us west, to the middle of the ocean and away from the island, but we beat on against it. I dip my paddle in unison with Jost's orders, although the wind catches his voice and carries off many of the commands. At a distance the waves seem small, but as they crest closer, my heart pounds. I concentrate on timing my paddle strokes to control the helpless panic threatening to break over me with each new swell.

The prison is in sight, towering on the horizon. It stretches across the island, demanding my total focus. All of the answers lie there.

A wave seizes us, and I miss the beat. The force of the ocean knocks the paddle from my hands and without thinking I reach out for it. I barely have time to register the panic and take a final breath before I go under.

The water is black and cold, and it pushes me with ancient force. My arms stroke against the pressure, but it pushes me farther down until my muscles are on fire. Slowly the burning dissipates and I relax, letting the water take me down, down, down. I open my mouth and let it flow into me until I am the ocean itself. But when the last of the air seeps from my body, I gulp against the pressure until my lungs stop trying and everything goes black.

THIRTY-SEVEN

GLASS SPLINTERS THROUGH MY BODY, THE ICE-COLD water bursting like shards into my skin. And the darkness—a void that presses me into nothing. I'm dead or very close to dead.

Cormac is going to win.

And then life rushes in at me and ebbs quickly out. *Bam!* My eyelids flutter. I see blue, then black. *Bam!* And the water gurgles from my throat. *Bam!* I suck at the air. I hack against the water, and my chest blazes.

"Adelice!"

I want to respond. I want to respond.

"Ad, I won't let you go. Stay with me." Erik's cry is more urgent and his lips are on mine, like a kiss that pumps into my chest, breathing into me.

Lifesaving.

Life changing.

I feel heavy, locked to the rocky shoreline. I want to roll over and drain into the ground, but I can't find the strength. I'm so exhausted. Erik is next to me. His arm is around me, but he doesn't move.

My body can't respond. For the first time in weeks, I want to cry—to pour my sorrows into a puddle of mistakes beneath me. I let my tears come then. Tears for the life I lost in Arras. Memories overcome me. My parents dancing in the kitchen, my sister giggling over the daily gossip, Enora fussing about my outfit. Running, running, running with no need, because I wanted to. Now I can't stop running long enough to catch my breath, and the whole world seems murky in the strange shadow of Alcatraz.

I struggle to my feet, my muscles protesting the movement. Immediately I regret standing. Not only does it hurt, but also, it's cold. My suit flaps at the waist, and I realize Erik must have undone it to save me. I stare down at him. He isn't moving and the shaking starts, rolling through me as powerfully as the waves that snatched me from the raft.

The cold makes the tremors of my body more violent, and I realize my clothing is soaked. I drop back onto the ground as quietly as I can and maneuver into Erik's arms.

"You okay?" he murmurs, his eyes still shut.

"I think so." But as I speak, my teeth chatter, the chill curling into my fingers and into my core.

Erik snaps to and stares at me, his eyes wide with concern. Then a moment later he starts unbuttoning my wet jacket.

"What are you doing?" I demand, trying to find the strength to pull away.

"Stop fighting me," he says as he strips off my jacket and starts on my shirt.

"Erik," I begin, but the shuddering stops my tongue from forming words.

He doesn't speak, just tugs my shirt off. I'm too cold and too tired to feel self-conscious or awkward. And then he starts stripping himself.

"Erik!" It's more of a shriek than a name.

Erik wraps his arms around me, drawing me closer until I'm cocooned in the heat of his body. My skin wakes and warms to his, and we stare at each other until I feel heat rising everywhere.

"I thought I lost you," he murmurs.

"You didn't," I say.

"Adelice, I—"

"I know," I stop him.

His lips are on mine, full but gentle, and I feel liberated by his kiss. The want of it. The need of it. We crush against each other. I explore every bit of his mouth—the subtle bow in his top lip, the softness of his bottom lip, where the two crease. When we pull apart, he's breathless and wide-eyed, and I see myself, equally excited, reflected back in his irises.

After a few awkward pants, I laugh, and his mouth splits into a wide grin.

"We have horrible timing," I say.

"No," he says, showering me with dozens of tiny kisses. "Better late than never."

He hovers over me, and I know we have to go. We have to find the others.

“We’ll have our time, Ad,” he promises me.

I reach up and brush his hair behind his ears, noticing that my fingers still tremble even though I’m no longer cold. I want to believe him.

*

The terrain onshore is difficult to navigate. The wild grass can’t be counted on for help. One handful might give me enough leverage to hike up higher, but the next betrays me. Erik pauses for a moment, farther up the hill than me.

“You know, Ad,” he calls over the bursts of wind off the water, “I could carry you up.”

“Like a sack of flour?” I ask in mock interest.

“Nah, like a newlywed,” he yells. “Over the threshold into a prison of lies.”

“What every girl dreams of,” I shout back. I don’t stop climbing, although a good part of me would like to see Erik trying to carry me up, and the wicked part of me has other reasons for wanting to be in his arms.

Erik loses his grip and slides back several feet, but I keep going. My effort is rewarded when my hand finds flat, solid ground, and hoisting myself up, I discover a road. Scrambling over the side, I sit and wait for Erik, feet dangling over the precipice I’ve surmounted.

He takes one look at me and groans. “You’re looking smug, Miss Lewys.”

“I’m feeling it,” I admit, kicking my feet back and forth.

“Mind taking a moment from your superiority and giving me a hand?”

I pull myself to my feet and lean over, arm out wide. “Benevolence is one of my many superior attributes.”

Erik uses me to balance, but I sense he’s trying not to put too much force on me.

“For Arras’s sake,” I swear, latching on to his hand more tightly and pulling against his weight, but then he pulls back and I stumble forward under his weight. A small cry escapes my lips before I realize he’s already on the road. He’s merely pulled me into his arms.

He radiates heat against me, his hair clustered in thick waves from the moisture in the air. In the night, his eyes are silver-gray and wild as the ocean below us.

“I know,” he says before I can protest, leaning closer to me, “we don’t have time.”

I’m caught in the moment. The waves thundering against the rocks, the piercing cries of seagulls, the thick darkness that wraps us in a haze of fog.

“I could make the time. It’s another perk of my superiority,” I remind him. But before I close the gap between his mouth and mine, light blinds us.

“Ad, this is your father,” I hear Dante yell from a distance. “Let go of that boy before you make me vomit.”

“I need to speak with him about invoking his parental claims,” I mutter, but Erik chuckles.

The rest of the group is on the next bend of the road winding up the side of the island, so Erik and I race toward them. When we reach them, Dante gives me a hug, catching me by surprise. I’m transported back to the night of my retrieval—the last time I felt a parent’s arms around me. When he drops his arms, he backs away, not meeting my eyes.

“We thought you both drowned,” Valery whispers, looping her arm through mine. “But Jost and Dante wouldn’t stop looking.”

Wistfulness flashes across her face, but can’t settle onto her drawn, tired countenance. I hook an arm around her waist and her head sinks onto my shoulder.

My eyes fall to Jost, but he turns away, not even offering a hello. If he’d had doubts about where my relationship with Erik was heading, he doesn’t anymore. I don’t blame him for not looking at me. I can’t change any of it though, so I trudge forward. Dante nods awkwardly at me. He might be able to pull out his parental feelings in jest, but he can’t express them now.

“Have you found the entrance to the prison yet?” Erik asks.

“We’ve been looking for you,” Jost says. His voice, though weary, lacks recrimination.

“You’ve found us. Let’s go,” I say, finding myself energized by proximity to our destination.

“Ad.” Jost catches my arm and draws me to the side. “I’m glad you’re safe. Both of you.”

We shift awkwardly and I think he might hug me, but he doesn’t. Instead he gives me a small smile before he turns back to our mission.

The island is dark, no light shining from the wind-beaten watchtower. Without the sun, the only light comes from the stars and a crescent moon perched in the dusky sky. The silhouette of the fortress grows larger as we draw nearer. It should intimidate, but all I feel is the tug of familiarity. Stone walls that reach to the sky, a well-placed turret. It’s not so different from the Coventry, except this prison has windows—something the Guild didn’t permit us. But even with windows, it looks impossible to escape this place.

A variety of buildings dot the perimeter, but they are as silent as death. Save for the occasional dancing light that disappears as soon as I turn follow it, there’s no sign of life.

“What if no one’s here?” I ask Dante.

“Then we keep looking,” he assures me, but there’s doubt seeping into his words. Perhaps he’s starting to understand the role of a father after all. He’s trying to offer me comfort and assurance even if it’s a lie.

If Alcatraz is abandoned, where we will start? I know it will come to a decision: keep looking or reenter Arras through the loophole to save our families. For the first time, standing on the brink of discovery, I face the possibility of returning. I know I can’t—won’t—go back. I can’t choose Amie over an entire world, and I buoy myself against the ache of that realization, because if I let myself feel it, I’ll shatter on the spot.

The yard is enclosed by a concrete wall and foreboding-looking wire loops across the top. We circle the perimeter for a long time before we find a loading dock that leads us to an entrance.

“I thought there would be more security,” Jost notes. He takes a few steps forward so the handlight’s beam travels to the front of the prison.

“Yeah, this place looks dead,” Valery says in a small voice. “Maybe we should turn back.”

“No,” I say firmly. “This place is huge. We won’t know anything until we get inside.”

Valery whimpers her acquiescence. Dante draws a gun from its holster and hands it to Erik. Jost already has one.

“If something happens, the best thing you can do is warp us some safety,” Dante tells me.

The thought stops me cold. Even with practice, I’ve barely been able to control my grasp on Earth’s wild strands. If I choose the wrong one, I could sever one of them. I could bring Alcatraz tumbling down on us.

Dante stops and places a hand on my shoulder. “You can do it, Adelice. You’ll have to.”

We snake through the entrance, looking for a way inside the prison. We’re about to give up when a creak puts us on high alert. No one moves in the group, but as the seconds tick by it seems more likely that we’re dealing with the wind and nothing more. The entrance empties into a small sally port like the ones used in the Icebox safe house. The door on the other side is unlocked. If the Whorl was here, they wouldn’t allow such lax conditions. My heart sinks right as a gunshot whistles by and buffets along the walls behind me. I’m so taken aback that I don’t react until Dante shoves me to the ground, his other arm swinging his gun into position in front of him. The crack of bullets bounces around the large concrete enclosure and I snap to, willing myself to see the wild fabric of the universe. To my surprise it comes into focus easily and I realize we’re not dealing with a vacant, decrepit building. The prison has been reinforced against both nature and time.

The strands of time don’t flash with the inconsistency I’ve grown accustomed to. They aren’t wild, but rigid and set, making them easier to see and harder to manipulate. But it’s amazing what adrenaline can do and I wrench a long, thick strand from its locked position and ruffle it in my hand. The effect is instantaneous, the warp blocking a shot just in time. The bullet ricochets off the strands, skittering across the floor. From a distance I see the guard who’s shooting at us peek out from behind a concrete pillar, confused by what’s happened. It’s the opening we need, and Dante fires around the warped spot, hitting him in his shoulder. The guard’s gun clatters to the floor and he falls back. Alive, but stunned.

Scrambling to our feet, we rush at him. Erik grabs his gun, tucking it into the waistband of his pants.

“Where are the others?” Dante demands, pressing the muzzle of his gun to the wounded man’s temple.

“There are none,” the guard splutters. “Only me.”

“We’ll find them,” Dante threatens.

“Only my family. Please don’t hurt them,” he begs, clutching his bloody shoulder.

“We won’t hurt your family,” I say softly. “I promise. We need to know if there are other guards.”

“No one else is here but the scientist,” he says quickly.

“The scientist?” Dante repeats, daring a glance at me.

“Are you going to kill him?” the guard asks in a tremulous voice.

“We’re going to save him,” I say.

The guard’s eyes dart to each of us, trying to make sense of who we are and why we’ve come. “They don’t keep him here.” He nods to the silent cell block behind him. “He lives in the old warden’s house.”

I’d expected to steal a machine, not stumble upon a scientist tucked away on a prison island.

“If you’re smart,” Dante says, his gun still on him, “you’ll get your wife to tend to that wound and then you’ll get off this island. If you come back for us, she’ll be burying you. Do you understand?”

The man groans a yes, clearly torn between his duty and his life.

“I can’t promise they won’t hurt your family if you attack us again, Lucas,” I say, reading the name tag on the guard’s antiquated uniform.

Dante doesn’t lower his gun as the man shuffles toward the exit and I wait, dread pulsing through me, to see if he’ll shoot him. As soon as he gets to the door, Dante calls out and I freeze expectantly. “Lucas, I wouldn’t bother contacting your superiors—not if you want to protect your family. I’d hide if I were you.”

“Where?” Lucas asks in a hopeless tone. “There’s nowhere to hide from them.”

“The Icebox,” Dante answers.

“That’s four hours from here.”

“You better get moving then,” Dante says. “And don’t look back.”

He nods once at us, revulsion and shame mingling in his features.

“Why would they keep a scientist on the island but outside the prison?” I ask. “They have all these cells.”

“Prisoners are happier when they forget they’re in a cage,” Erik reminds me.

“But if he’s not locked up, why doesn’t he leave?” Valery asks in a shaking voice. Her features are pale with fear.

“Look at this rock,” I tell her. “There’s no escaping.” I keep my thoughts about the composition of the prison to myself. If the Guild has artificially altered it, I need to study it more to understand how and why they’ve used such resources, although I have a pretty good idea already. Whatever secrets the Guild keeps here are locked not only on this island but also in time, like the moments I warped to guard my rendezvouses with Jost at the Coventry.

“Actually, it’s a good thing that he’s not locked up,” Dante assures Valery.

She gives him a blank look. I’m not sure I know what he’s getting at either.

“The scientist will have food,” Dante says, making for the exit. “I’m hungry.”

THIRTY-EIGHT

THE WARDEN'S HOUSE LIES BEYOND THE PRISON—Far enough to be both convenient to it and secluded from it. Its stone façade sweeps into elegant lines and a tiled roof. Light glows from several of the oversized windows as we make our way to the door. The boys keep their guns raised, and I catch Dante looking back over his shoulder.

We congregate on a worn porch, and I rap on the door. Then we wait, barely breathing, for an answer.

When the door swings open, I can't stifle my surprise. I know the scientist. He's the man from the news clipping in the Old Curiosity Shop and from the propaganda film I watched at Kincaid's estate. *Kairos*. He's no older now than he was then. He has the same aging skin and shock of unkempt white hair. His eyes are ancient and tired.

"Company," he says. His tone is friendly but his voice peaks strangely on the word, highlighting the vowels, and making them sound exotic on his tongue. He ignores the guns leveled at his head. "I was making tea. I'll have to put more water on."

"Hold it right there," Dante says.

"My boy," the scientist says, and I hear the slight shift in his tone—not to anger but rather annoyance—"I'm a man of science, not violence. Keep your guns if you must, but I promise I'm not going to attack you with boiling water."

I bite against the smile tugging at my lips. No one makes a move to follow him inside, so I step forward, following him as he shuffles off. Erik is at my side in an instant. He's lowered his gun, but it's still in his hand.

"Your friend does not trust me," the scientist notes.

I blush a little, oddly embarrassed to feel we've insulted him with our wariness. It's a strange reaction given that I know I'm in the presence of the man who's responsible for creating the first looms and Arras itself.

"He's a little protective," I say apologetically.

"Ah, a beau then?" the old man asks with a wink, and I flush more.

“I won’t let them shoot you,” I say.

The man’s head falls back and he laughs, deep and bellowing, ignoring the kettle he’s filling. “I like you. I will pretend that was a joke and that we are friends. Yes?”

“Yes,” I confirm with a smile.

“What are your names?” he asks, setting the kettle to heat on the stove. He ambles to the cupboard and riffles through its contents. Next to me Erik cracks his knuckles until I push his hands apart.

“I’m Adelice Lewys,” I say.

“And you are here to destroy the Guild of Twelve Nations?” He says the last words with mock ferocity, but I hear it in his voice: he’s not mocking our desire, he’s dismissing it. He must have seen his fair share of failed attempts to destroy the Guild over the years.

“I suppose,” I say. “I want to separate the worlds. Not destroy them per se.”

“A worthy ambition,” he notes. “If a foolish one.”

I blink against his honesty. He offers me a mug with a tea bag perched and waiting inside. “You bear my mark.”

I look at my outstretched hand, at my techprint, and nod. “Kairos. Your name.”

“Not my name, but I’m flattered. They called me Dr. Albert Einstein before they called me a traitor and stuck me in here,” he says.

“Dr. Einstein, I’m Adelice,” I say, this time offering my right hand to shake his. It feels awkward given my own preference for the left hand, but we manage it.

“Albert,” he says firmly. “Call me Albert. I have not been called Dr. Einstein in so long it feels I have lost the privilege.”

“We have a lot of questions,” Erik says. He’s juggling the gun and a chipped teacup and it makes me laugh.

“I think you can put that away,” I say, motioning to his weapon.

Erik takes a long look at Albert and then looks back at me. I nod encouragingly and he slips the gun into his waistband.

“Yes, but it will not do to answer them here,” Albert says as the teakettle shrieks its readiness on the stove. “And the tea is ready.”

Albert carefully pours the boiling water into the waiting cups, trying not to spill and apologizing repeatedly for the few drops that splash onto

our hands. He's no threat, but that might mean he's no help either. I help him with the mugs and we take them into the other room and disburse them to Jost, Dante, and Valery. The three linger, uncomfortably, in the sitting room and Albert gestures for them to sit down while he goes to shut the front door.

When he returns he introduces himself and waits patiently while the others give their names. He repeats each as if consigning it to memory.

"We have a lot of questions, Albert," Dante says. "Not the least of which is why you're living here."

"Instead of the cold prison?" Albert guesses. "A concession for good behavior. The Guild of Twelve Nations views me as a threat intellectually not physically. As long as people are kept away from me, I'm not a risk."

"And your guard and his family?" Jost asks.

"Lucas and his family are simple people. Lovely supper guests, but not terribly interested in physics and my scientific mumbo jumbo." Albert pauses, his cup hovering near his lips. His whiskers tickling its rim. "I do hope you have not hurt them."

"We sent them away," I assure him. "We're not here to hurt anyone."

"A curious method of revolution."

"We're not here to hurt anyone who is innocent," Dante corrects.

"But what is innocence?" Albert muses. "*Ignorance?*"

"Maybe," Dante says, shifting in his chair.

"Or good intentions?" Albert adds.

I look across the room at my companions. Only Erik seems at ease, blowing steam off his tea and taking shallow sips. The rest roost with their shoulders hunched, hanging on Albert's every word.

"Maybe a gut reaction," I offer. "Lucas was acting on orders. Something we can *all* forgive."

"You have acted under orders then?" he asks.

I remember the thick, coarse strand I removed from the loom under Loricel's watchful eye. I had acted under orders with good intentions, but under Albert's piercing gaze, I don't feel absolved.

"I have," I admit, "but not anymore."

"And that is how you became a rebel," he says. "Did you flee from Arras or were you born of Earth?"

"We're refugees," I tell him.

“So many of you and so young. How did you discover the truth?”

“I was taken into service,” I begin.

“A renegade Spinster? Delightful.”

“Adelice was set to be the new Creweler, and she can alter.” Erik jumps in. I flash him a look for interrupting me, but it’s clear he thought I should cut to the chase.

“Then you are the one I’ve waited for.” Albert’s words are so soft that I’m not sure anyone else heard them, as though they were meant only for me. “Do you each bear the mark of Kairos?”

“No,” Dante says. “Only Adelice and I do. The true rebellion died out years ago, but we are rebuilding. Although another man pretends to have the same agenda as our predecessors.”

“There is a *false* rebellion now?” Albert asks questions with the interest of a man awoken from a long sleep. He has no idea what’s happened in the outside world since he was left here.

“A man named Kincaid wants to find the Whorl,” I tell him.

“I know Kincaid,” Albert says darkly. “If he’s fallen from the Guild’s favor, he’s no one to trifle with.”

“Unfortunately we learned that the hard way,” I say.

“So this is it?” Albert asks. “The final withering offspring of rebellion.”

“No, there are more of us, but not enough to stand up to the Guild.” Dante has told me of the expectations he had when he came to Earth, of the stories his mother—my grandmother—whispered to him of a powerful legion of men who could free Arras. But they were only stories, and the rebellion was once a fledgling barely able to stand on its own legs.

“When they locked me away, armies were mounting,” Albert says, slipping into nostalgia. “They weren’t my armies though. No matter what they claimed.”

“Why not?” I ask, surprised.

“Because I wasn’t interested in starting another war. I didn’t believe it was my place to end the Guild or their politics. I merely wanted to stop their destruction of those that remained on this planet. The best way to do this was to separate the worlds and end Arras’s dependence on Earth.” His tea sloshes dangerously as he waves his arms.

“But you must have known what the Guild was capable of,” I say.

“The Guild is not so different from the governments of Earth. Civil war, world war, these are the inventions of men,” he says. “Terrible inventions, but part of the span of human history. Perhaps someday we may as a species evolve past violence.”

“And you think the Guild is capable of that kind of growth?” Jost asks in a mocking tone full of resentment. “I’ve seen what the Guild can do. There’s been no evolution.”

“Evolution is dependent on change. The change of generations. Children learn from the mistakes of their parents. Even small shifts can create a ripple effect, moving people forward, bringing progress. But how can such change occur if the generations are stymied?” he asks, letting the question linger in the air above us.

“You’re referring to the race of immortals running this party,” Dante says, leaning forward. His tea is abandoned on the table next to him. “Immortals you created.”

“A most regrettable side effect,” Albert admits. “We were working on a tight deadline against our enemies. The weapon the Axis powers were perfecting could have destroyed everyone. It was a bomb unlike anything the Earth had ever seen. I warned the Allied powers, and when they presented an alternate solution meant to preserve life—”

“The Cypress Project?” I guess.

Albert nods. “I was the one who introduced the idea of splicing strands into threads. It was meant to prevent illness and strengthen the population. We could not foresee the effect this new world would have on the immune system, but our technology could circumvent unexpected diseases. Renewal patching was meant to safeguard the fledgling population.”

“But the Guild abused the technology you created.”

“It is every scientist’s dream to better the human condition. But, as you surmised, the officials realized they could use the technology to prevent aging. It allowed them to stay in power.”

“It gave them absolute power,” I say.

“A very dangerous thing,” Albert says with a sigh. “In retrospect I should have anticipated this issue, but the government didn’t give us time to think outside of creating the looms and starting the project. I didn’t

stop to consider how the looms could be misused. I was merely concerned with making Arras functional and safe for the population. I have often regretted my participation, but I do accept my role in what was done."

Shame falls over his face, but I see the value behind his motives. Unlike Cormac, who tried to sell me on the good of the many, Albert actually acted in such parameters. He had done what seemed best, only to realize too late the dreadful repercussions his actions would cause.

"Why not bomb Arras? Take them down?" Erik asks, and I frown at his callous suggestion.

Albert's answer mirrors my thoughts. "I wanted to save lives, not destroy them."

"How did that work out for you?" Dante challenges.

"Intentions again. I accept my role, and if you could do the same, we could move on," Albert replies.

The reprimand settles over the room. Everyone reacts differently. Dante sits up straighter. Jost and Erik look at each other. Valery slouches, turning her attention to the window.

"You said you didn't anticipate the Guild misusing the looms," I say, prompting him to return to more fruitful topics.

"I did not," he admits. "I should have. You must understand, the government pushed forward with the project, but they weren't the ones who would form the Twelve Nations. Not as you understand them today."

"If the Guild isn't comprised of the governments of the nations, who are these men? Who is Cormac Patton?" I ask.

"Ah, Patton, nasty piece of work but a very rich man. They all were. War had stretched America's funds to the brink. Families were living on rations and going without. Everyone was doing their bit to help, and many of the other nations in the Cypress Project were doing the same."

"Funny that they never bothered to get rid of those provisions once Arras was a reality," Jost mutters.

"There is security in knowing your people are totally dependent on you to survive," Albert says. "That was one of the first indications that something had rotted at the core of the Cypress Project. I'd had qualms about allowing the financial backers of the project to take positions of authority, but I was merely a scientist. No one would listen to me."

“No one listens to the man who creates the solution,” Erik says with an empty laugh. “No wonder things didn’t work out.”

Albert raises his cup to this as if toasting the lunacy of the predicament. “The officials were heavily involved with the project. These were powerful men—men of immense wealth—and they seemed obsessed with a positive outcome as long as it guaranteed a world where their own standing would not be diminished.”

“Warning sign number two,” I say.

“Indeed. But they were invested in how the science of the looms could benefit their businesses. They sold us on their concern about the world, the people, their customers. I recognized the greed in them.”

“But you missed their ambition to use the looms as a fountain of youth,” Dante points out.

“Having never been obsessed with such a ludicrous notion, I did. I fancied myself a man of science, not a man looking for glory and immortality. It never occurred to me,” Albert says.

“But how did they do it then? If you didn’t help?” I ask.

“Not every one of the scientists shared my ideals, but many of them shared my intelligence. Men like Cormac and Kincaid hung around asking questions—not to explore how the looms could be used to their advantage, but to ascertain who among the scientists could help them achieve these possible benefits.”

“So one of your men turned on you.” It’s Valery who points this out.

“Yes, my lady. The officials established who would help them in their grand plans and set it in motion in secret laboratories in Arras.”

“And they made themselves immortal,” I say.

“That is not entirely correct.” Albert stops me. “To truly be immortal, you would have to be nearly untouchable. They are still vulnerable to disease and injury.”

“But they have those who can alter and patch them into health.”

“Yes, but their so-called immortality skirts a fine line. It can be taken in an instant.”

“So Cormac can be killed,” I say.

“He can,” Albert confirms. “Do you feel it necessary?”

“How else can we liberate the people? Separate Earth from Arras?” Dante cries, the words a fervent verdict of Cormac’s fate. “The Guild’s

time is up.”

Albert holds my gaze. He’s not asking us a practical question, he’s asking me an ethical one. He’s asking me to look inside myself and see how far I’m willing to go.

“If we separated the worlds, Arras would have to learn to depend on its own resources. There would be upheaval. Change,” I say softly.

“The course of evolution would begin again,” Albert replies.

“Does anyone have any clue what we’re talking about?” Erik asks, but Dante tells him to shut up. If the others are having trouble following, they aren’t about to interrupt.

“Where do we begin?” I ask.

“I can guide you,” Albert says, a sad smile peeking from beneath his mustache, “but it will be difficult. Arras is a parasitic universe syphoning Earth’s time and resources, but if the edges of Arras were bound and released, the composition of Earth would achieve critical mass, creating a rift in space-time that Arras could occupy, separate from Earth. It could heal. The looms would be useless then, but Arras would be self-sustaining.”

“And the Whorl can do this?” I ask in a breathless voice, trying to wrap my head around what Albert is telling us. If Arras was separated from Earth, both could survive. I wouldn’t have to choose which world to save, and I could prevent the growing threat of all-out war between them.

“The Whorl can tie the edges of Arras together, separating them from the looms, and knitting Arras’s time into an infinite weave.” Albert knits his fingers together into a circle and holds it to his eyes. “Time will flow from beginning to end in a ceaseless circle of life.”

“That’s why we need you. We need the Whorl,” Dante says.

“Ah, dear boy, I do not have the Whorl.”

“Then where it is?” Jost demands. He’s risen from his seat and he grips the mantel. His desperation to get back to Arras and save Sebrina is written in anguished lines over his face.

“The Whorl is not a thing. It is a person,” Albert says.

“You’re the Whorl,” Dante guesses.

“No,” Albert says with a shake of his head. “She is.”

His finger points directly at me.

THIRTY-NINE

THE BURDEN OF HIS WORDS SETTLES DOWN on me, weighing across my chest. I don't hear how the others react. They blur out of focus as I'm forced once again to confront responsibility and purpose. I should be accustomed to this tangled dance of power and obligation, but I feel the constriction of it. I tried to let go of the idea of saving myself, of saving Amie, but the idea of saving the world on my own—of wielding such terrible and awesome power—is nearly more than I can bear.

"Adelice." Erik is beside me, coaxing me back to the present. His hands are wrapped, hot, around my wrists. "You okay?"

I anchor myself in his presence. Erik pushes me and accepts me when I'm still only human. If I can latch on to him and syphon his strength, maybe I can face what's coming next.

"How can you know that?" Dante is demanding of Albert. I focus on his words, willing my mind to participate in the exchange of information.

"You said she was the Creweler," Albert says, but he's holding something back. I can see that.

"I was supposed to be the Creweler," I correct. "I never finished my training."

"So you can catch the elements and command them," he says. "What else? There is more."

I nod, pushing the information out of my torpid mind. "I can alter like a Tailor."

"So genetically you have both powers," he says.

"Yes, I must have gotten them from my parents," I say, filling him in on the strange relationship between Dante and me. On how the time dilation has affected our lives' courses as we lived on the disparate timelines of two worlds.

"Has your mother been tested? It would be interesting to analyze her genetic makeup, along with his—"

I stop him before the lump in my throat swells and dams my voice. "My mother is a Remnant. I doubt she'd cooperate."

“Her mother’s genetics and mine,” Dante jumps in, “created something special, unique, like a mutation.”

“Not exactly, dear boy,” Albert says, and then pauses. “I feel especially strange calling you that now, given that you have a nearly grown daughter.”

“It’s weird for the rest of us, too,” Erik says.

“Genetic abilities skip around, appearing in seemingly strange fashion, but they’re not random. Once it became clear that I had a method of separating the worlds, the Guild worked feverishly to prevent that from happening,” Albert says.

“Why? Why would they want to remain dependent on Earth?” Jost asks. “Earth was a threat to them.”

“And an opportunity. You must not forget these were businessmen,” Albert tells him. “Earth had resources, and the Guild was uncertain we wouldn’t require more of them. But I think, truly, they were unable to divorce themselves from the possibility of this world. What if they could discover ways of using it to their own advantage later? And then there was the real need of a hiding spot should their schemes be discovered.”

“In case anyone found out the same men were running the show,” I say.

“But they had Tailors to keep that a secret,” Dante says.

“Yes, but men are fickle. Uprisings occur no matter how tightly you grip the masses in your hands. Earth was an insurance plan, but more important, tying Arras off from Earth would take away their looms. It would take away their control.

“Your story about your unusual parentage answers a lot of my questions,” Albert continues. “The Guild tried very hard to prevent you from existing.”

“Prevent me?” This is news to me. They’d always seemed overeager to have me.

“Marriage laws, segregation, courtship appointments. It is a strange way to run a world, no?” Albert asks.

“They told us we had to be pure.”

“An antiquated means of control, but unfortunately many well-meaning parents and authorities bought into it. Those laws enabled the Guild to hide the true motivation behind their actions.”

“Which was?” Dante asks.

“Controlling the genetics of those who came into the weave,” he says. “We engineered Spinsters, cultivated the creative, life-giving nature of women, but Tailors were an unanticipated side effect.”

“How did it happen?” I ask.

“We studied boys, too. We needed to see how the experiments would affect male offspring. They did not seem to possess the necessary abilities, so we felt assured we could measure and control the populace. We could easily guess which girls might be born with the ability. Marriages were arranged, children were watched, we waited for signs.”

I recall Loricel telling me how she watched me, covered up for me. No one would second-guess her motives. It was clear she had wanted to be done with the system after decades of choosing sacrifice over self, but how had they not known I could be the thing they dreaded the most?

“So you tagged us?” Dante says with a note of disgust.

“I’m afraid so. When we realized we had misunderstood the nature of the genetic ability in boys, I saw my opportunity. A child born with both sets of the genetic makeup to weave and to alter could bind Earth off. Everything centered on that child.”

“It couldn’t have been a boy then?” I ask.

“No, only a girl could possess both genetic traits. The weaving trait refused to manifest in male children, but alteration could pass to a female. The Guild worked hard to prevent that through monitoring the population,” Albert explains.

“But I don’t understand,” Jost interrupts. “How can she have both if the abilities are both born of the same engineering?”

“The genes evolved, much in the way that genes have evolved to make us smarter, more resilient. Think of it as lines in a book.” Albert lifts a volume from the table near him and opens to a page. “We cannot have two line ones in the same book. Weaving is line one, and Tailoring, or altering, is line two. They are different lines of the genetic code. Adelice possesses both genetic lines from her parents. They are separate and unique abilities, even though on a fundamental level their structure and composition of are strikingly similar.”

“And because I have both I can capture the elements needed to ensure Arras is whole—”

“While being able to tie it off, altering its fundamental makeup in the most profound way,” Albert says, his words more an intonation to the universe than fact.

“Good,” I say, blinking. “I wouldn’t want this to be easy.”

“I know it is a lot to take in,” Albert says.

“Yes, and we’re on a timetable,” Dante butts in. “We’re going to have sort out this tangled web elsewhere.”

Albert gives him a curious look. “You assume Lucas will betray you?”

“Remember how we said we fell in with Kincaid,” I say quietly. “We gave him the slip, but it won’t take him long to track us.”

“I see,” Albert says. “If you have the abilities you claim, you know it will be difficult for me to leave this island. I will need your assistance.”

I pause and stare at him, not understanding.

“You must see it,” he prompts. “Use your sight, Adelice.”

Everything around me fades to the background, softening into a weave. The room comes to life in a snarl of colors and light. The time threads are frozen into place. I stare harder at Albert, willing myself to see his composition. It’s still difficult for me and I slow my breath and let go until he shifts into strands of the universe—strands tied to the time of this room.

“That’s why you’re allowed to live here,” I say. “They’ve bound you to this moment. This house.” Albert couldn’t leave if he wanted to, not without help from someone who had the skill to disentangle him from the weave of the house’s place and time. He was frozen in a prison of space and time.

“Say what?” Jost asks.

“He’s been altered. They’ve wound Albert’s strands into the time and matter here.” I turn pleading eyes to Erik, knowing he can see it as clearly as I can, but he gives me the barest shake of his head. He won’t reveal his secret, and I feel the burning promise I made to him in my very flesh.

“So he’s a part of the house,” Erik says slowly, obviously playing dumb.

“More or less,” I confirm for the benefit of the others.

“Can you, I don’t know, extract him?” Erik asks.

“I think I can.”

“I was hoping for a bit more assurance,” Erik says.

“I can,” I say more confidently, “with *Dante’s* help.” I want Erik to volunteer, but he’s made it clear that he won’t admit his alteration skills to his brother.

Dante nods, surveying Albert and the objects in the room.

“Why don’t you guys wait outside?” Dante suggests.

As soon as the others leave, Dante comes to my side and I see the same look of concentration cross his face. I know he can see the composition of Albert and the objects in the room, which should be enough.

“Can you see it?” I ask.

“I think so, but, Ad, I’m not as gifted as you are,” he says, squeezing my hand. “I can see Albert’s strands, but it’s obvious this is more advanced than simple alteration. You need someone with real training. Someone who knows the Guild’s handiwork better than I.” The statement peaks on the final word, and he leaves it hanging there. He knows Erik can alter, but he leaves the suggestion open.

“I know, but that’s why I need *you*,” I say with emphasis. “I can see the big picture. I can see how they’ve manipulated the time in here, and once I release it, he’ll need you to bind it off.”

“Tie it off?” Dante says, unsure.

“You’ll see. Watch his strands, once he’s released from the time of the room, he’ll be leaching time, sort of like bleeding, I guess. You have to stop the bleeding. That’s all.”

Albert in the meantime has remained in his seat, watching us with fascination.

“Are you ready for us to try, Doctor?” I ask.

“Yes,” he says.

“I can’t guarantee anything,” I warn him.

“I understand and accept that. The mortal man in me is—admittedly—a bit afraid. Not so much of death but of pain. It was not pleasant when they did this to me in the first place. But the scientist in me is eager for the adventure. Your abilities fascinate me.”

“You say that now,” Dante mutters.

I take a deep breath and focus on the room. There are many strands at play in the composition of it, but perhaps because it’s more reminiscent

of the artificial weave of Arras, I feel oddly at ease. I understand how this room exists and how Albert exists within it. He is part of the larger tapestry of the house, connected to the sluggish time strands that lie within the permanent architecture of the house—objects locked into place and time. In short, a house. The trick will be to rend him of them quickly and with as little pain as possible. I focus harder until I see Albert, his natural time allotment interlaced with the permanent time of the house, locking him into place. I have to separate his strands and sever those of the room. If I fail, if I accidentally sever one of his natural time strands, the results could be disastrous, but I try not to think about that.

"I wish I had a hook or something," I mutter.

"Why?" Dante asks in a shaky voice.

"I need to rip something. It would be easier."

"How did you rip through Arras?" Dante asks.

"I was *really* pissed off," I admit.

"Can you channel that, but maybe over at the wall?" Dante suggests. "If you severed the time over there, we could pull it through his strands."

This is why I asked for Dante's help. His second set of eyes proves invaluable. I'd been planning on severing the time of the room within Albert, which might have gotten messy.

"It would help if I was pissed off," I point out.

"You need help getting there? Let's see. Kincaid betrayed you. Planned to alter you. Your sister is in the Coventry, and Arras knows what they've done to her. They've murdered your f-father." Dante stumbles on the word. "Your whole world is built on lies. Am I helping?"

I feel the familiar ache of rage rising in my chest.

"And if you don't do this, we'll die at the Guild's hands," Dante adds softly. "They'll kill me and him. They'll kill Jost, Erik. If they don't turn them into monsters first."

Something snaps inside, something I'm unwilling to reason with or fight, and I reach out and rend the weave of the room. It splits down the middle in a jagged line. As it hangs open, the room around us starts to change. Furniture cracks and the walls crumble down. The room is unwinding on itself.

"I should have seen that coming," I say.

“Albert!” Dante shouts. Before us he trembles, aging slowly before our eyes, withering as we stare in horror.

“We have to extract him now. He’s decaying with the room.”

Dante and I set to work, gripping the severed time strands and sliding them out of Albert, extricating him quickly from the fractured web of time in the room. With each strand that’s pulled through him, he spasms, but the aging slows and his breathing returns to normal. He still bears the marks of age from the accelerated entropy, but he’s free.

Around us the room continues to crumble, falling in at the corners, and turning to dust. If I hadn’t had Dante to help me there was no way I could have extracted him in time. Dante pulls Albert up, and the old scientist rests against our shoulders as we dash toward the front door.

Amid the crumbling of wood and walls, Albert leans into me and whispers something in my ear. With time crashing in on us, the words barely process in my distracted mind, but they lodge there. I don’t have time to contemplate their meaning now.

Outside, the others wait. Jost paces the porch and Erik leans against the frame of the house, but Valery grips the railing, looking out on the choppy waters of the bay.

“It worked?” Jost says, jumping to help Dante bring Albert into the night air.

“Yes, but we’ve got to get out of here. The house isn’t stable,” I say.

“My papers,” Albert says with a moan.

“Where are they?” Dante asks. “I’ll go for them.”

“My study. The third door on the second level.” Albert’s voice is small and tired.

Dante and I exchange a look. Going back in will be dangerous, but he rushes into the house before I can say anything to stop him.

“We should go now,” Valery calls.

“Let’s give him a minute to catch his breath,” Jost suggests.

“No!” Valery’s refusal startles me, and I turn to her. Her shape is small against the blank night sky, but I see why she’s pushing us. In the distance, an aeroship is hovering over the water, coming closer to the island by the second.

“We’ve got company,” I yell.

“Who?” Erik asks, coming to my side. “Kincaid?”

“I can’t tell,” I say.

Valery turns to face us, and even in the dark I see her face is hollow. “The Guild.”

“How can you know that?” I ask.

She pauses, and I already dread her answer.

“Because I told them we would be here.”

FOURTY

“WHAT?” I ASK, MY MIND TRYING TO process the rapidly decaying house behind me, the sight of the hovering aeroship in the distance, and Valery’s betrayal at the same time.

It’s a bit too much to take in at once.

But Erik has his gun drawn. “I thought you landing in our party was a little suspicious. What did it take, Valery?”

She cowers back and he moves forward, edging closer to her, but she doesn’t run from him. “They did things to me. You saw the labs, Erik. Don’t you remember?”

“And now you’ve conveniently had a change of heart?” he snarls.

“Erik!” I call in a sharp voice.

“It wasn’t like that,” Valery says. She points to me as tears begin to stream down her face. “They told me it was your fault. That if I helped them, I could have Enora back, but …”

“But?” I prompt.

“They tried to make me forget her. Make me want other things. Cormac said they made me normal, and that when I returned to Arras, I would be happy,” she says, choking as she speaks, “because I had served the Guild.”

“They sent you here to spy on us,” Erik accuses.

“I hated you,” Valery says to me. Her words implore me to understand, and part of me does. The part of me that blames myself for Enora’s death. “That hate became stronger until it was the only feeling I was sure was true. It consumed me. When I saw you that day in the grey market, I wanted to lure you into an alley, and do what the Guild wouldn’t do.”

Icicles crawl down my spine, branching out in chills through my body. So I hadn’t imagined seeing Valery that day, but I didn’t know she had seen me, too.

“But you didn’t,” I say. “You didn’t do that, Valery. You’re better than they would let you be.”

“No, I followed orders. I led you to the shop, so that you would find the truth. Seek Kincaid and walk into their arms. They knew you would come here eventually, but only after you led Kincaid to the same place.”

Every moment has been engineered since we got here, carefully executed to ensure we would be standing here right now. Have all our decisions been so carefully directed by Valery? I consider how she warmed to us at the estate after being cold and unfriendly and then shifted back to coldness. Her connection with Deniel, the Tailor who attacked me. The rest is murky.

“You sent Deniel,” I accuse her, “so I would distrust Kincaid.”

“Cormac’s idea,” Valery admits. “He knew you would turn against him after you went snooping. We only had to get you to snoop.”

“Bit of a gamble,” Erik says.

“That’s the thing. The reason I’ve hated Adelice the most. She tries to do what’s right even at the cost of alliances and power.”

“And you hate me for that?”

“I hated you because it’s not that simple,” she cries. “Don’t you see what you’re sacrificing? Who you’re sacrificing?”

This time I advance on her, my fists balled, my body shaking. “I never wanted this. I’ve done the best I can. Do you want me to become another Creweler locked in a room doing the best I can? Or worse—Cormac?”

“I’m starting to understand.” Valery holds her hands out, stopping my advance and my words. “I tried to keep hating you, but I can’t anymore.”

“How is that even possible?” Jost asks, and it’s clear he doesn’t believe her.

“Emotional and psychological alteration is tricky,” Dante says, and I turn to see he’s been here listening to her confession. “It takes the most talented of Tailors. Don’t do it properly and it never fully takes, but alter too much and you wind up with a void, someone who seems half human, half there. Altering a person’s psychology can have drastic effects, turning a person into a blank slate.”

Beth, the girl next door when I was a child, a variant in her own little world. The citizens of Cypress watching with apathy as I cut the ribbon on their new school. Enora blankly reciting the Guild’s plan to map me. I’ve seen it myself throughout my life in Arras, never knowing how deep the Guild’s fingers were in the minds of those around me.

“But Enora was like Valery,” I say, pointing to her. “Except more …”

“Cunning?” he asks. “It should have been a warning sign, but it’s easy enough to overlook on Earth. They couldn’t remove her memories of you entirely, not if they wanted her to find you. But if she was your friend’s lover, they removed that. Spliced what they considered to be normal feelings into her.”

“I wanted her back,” Valery says, a break in her voice. “I remember that. Enough to do anything they asked.”

“They couldn’t give her back to you. Enora slipped past their fingers,” I tell her.

“I know. I *knew*, but it didn’t matter.”

Grief is a funny thing, I think. It can make you see things that aren’t there and ignore what’s in front of your face. Bitterness channels itself into anger and stupid backtalk and a million other destructive impulses. I knew that better than anyone.

“But why now?” Jost asks.

“Because it’s too late,” Erik says.

“No, it isn’t,” Valery says. “We can leave off the far side of the island.”

“That won’t buy us enough time,” Dante says to her. “You told us now because the alteration didn’t take. You may have hated Adelice, but emotional altering doesn’t work if a person changes her mind. Am I right in guessing you no longer harbor a grudge against her?”

“I tried. I wanted to keep hating her, because then it was easier,” she says.

Albert lifts his head and in a faint voice addresses us. “Nothing can remove free will. Our self-determination is bound to our very souls. It is the thing that defines our humanity.”

“You really want us to get away?” I ask in a low voice that only Valery can hear.

“Yes,” she says. “I’ll stay. I’ll misdirect them, but go.”

I know what they’ll do to Valery if we leave her behind, and part of me wants to go. The part that reels from her betrayal, that feels led around for months. But she’s made the same sacrifice that Enora would have made. That’s why they loved each other. I can’t blame her for being

angry and lashing out. Haven't I done the same? Haven't I risked lives in the Coventry with my smart, unthinking mouth?

"No one gets left behind," I say. "Jost, where's the boat?"

"We circled the island looking for you. It's on the northern side," he says.

"The ship is sailing from the south, so she's right. If we go now there might be enough time to get away," I say. "Get it ready."

"Ad," Erik says in a deep voice, "there's no way we can outrun that ship. Someone should stay behind. If you won't let her, then I'll do it."

"I know you think you have debts to pay, but stop trying to prove yourself," I snap. "I'm not letting any of you stay behind, especially not you."

Behind us the warden's house creaks, and a wall caves in, forcing Dante to drag Albert away from it. Dust from the plaster billows out around us.

"This is the first place they'll come," I say. "We shouldn't wait here."

Everyone scurries across the large concrete yard toward the prison, and the road that will lead us to the boat, but before I reach it, Erik's hand grabs my wrist, stopping me.

"You have to get away, Adelice. They're coming for you and Albert. I can't let them take you," he says.

"Why are you telling me this now? We can all go," I say.

"No, we can't," he says. "Not if there's a chance for you to escape. I can confuse them, lead them into the prison. We'll play hide-and-seek. It'll be fun." He tries to shrug nonchalantly, to look charming and casual and carefree, but his shoulders pitch too high and there's no sparkle in his eyes.

"I can't let you do that," I whisper, turning in to him.

"Yes, you can."

"What makes you so sure?"

"Because we love each other," he murmurs. "And we always knew this day would come."

My lips close over his, sealing the truth of his statement. I linger in the kiss, knowing what I have to do and dreading it. His lips stay firm against mine and his hand stays clasped tight in mine. Our bodies aren't fighting to press closer together. This kiss is gentle and full of promises

that can never be fulfilled, and it leaves an ache consuming me. It's the kiss we should have shared long ago, but never made the time for, and now it's too late. It's more than goodbye—it's regret.

Now. Only now, a tiny voice urges me.

So I kiss Erik. I kiss him goodbye. I kiss him for all the moments we will never have, and because I know I love him.

Because I know I'm leaving him.

FOURTY-ONE

THE BREEZE OFF THE OCEAN GHOSTS THROUGH us. Its chill makes me shiver and Erik pulls away, rubbing my shoulders to warm me, both of us dazed enough to forget where we are for a moment.

Unfortunately, a moment is too long to waste.

“Ahh, young love,” purrs a voice. “Isn’t that sweet?”

We whirl toward the voice. Ahead of us, the others are frozen to the spot. No one tries to run. We’re all trying to figure out what the next move is.

“Not expecting us?” Kincaid asks. “We RSVP’d.”

“This is so embarrassing,” I say, twisting from Erik’s arms. “But we have a previous engagement.”

“Yes? That is a pity,” Kincaid says, snapping the fingers of his gloves and removing each in delicate order.

Approaching footsteps—many, many footsteps—draw my attention away. Even Kincaid turns, but his face doesn’t fall when he sees Cormac Patton approaching. My own sags in frustration. We’re seriously outnumbered.

“I’ve tried to help her with her manners,” Cormac’s voice calls above the wind. He crunches across the pavement, a small army in tow. “But she’s resistant to change.”

“I like that,” I say to him, pushing against the roar of my pulse in my ears. It’s been nearly two months since I faced Cormac, years for him. “I’m ‘resistant to change.’ I think that’s a compliment coming from a would-be immortal.”

“Would-be?” Cormac cocks an eyebrow. “Don’t undersell me.”

“I’ll leave that up to you,” I assure him. “And, might I say, Cormac, that you haven’t aged a day.”

Cormac’s smirk deepens. “I’m glad we don’t have secrets anymore. Now you know what I can offer you. Erik,” he says, turning his attention to him, “I guess I know why you didn’t come back. It’s impolite to go after your boss’s wife.”

“Adelice isn’t your wife,” Erik says, stepping closer to me.

“She will be,” Cormac says. “You were supposed to watch her, not help her escape.”

“What’s he talking about?” Jost demands.

“You know how adept your brother is at keeping secrets, Jost. I suppose he never told you—” Dante begins.

“I see where she gets her smart tongue from,” Cormac butts in. “Don’t look so surprised, Adelice. Valery has kept us well informed of the many sordid developments from the surface.”

“That was low, you old dog,” Kincaid says, wagging a finger at Cormac. “You knew she was my style.”

“It takes an old dog to know one,” Cormac says. “And you know we can’t be taught new tricks.”

The exchange is cordial, even amused, like old friends bantering.

“That’s it!” I yell, stamping my foot. “Don’t you want to kill each other?” Because I wouldn’t mind killing both of them.

“Of course,” Cormac says.

“But we can be gentlemanly about it,” Kincaid says.

I storm forward against the protests of Erik.

“You hate him,” I say, pointing from Kincaid to Cormac, “and I assume he hates you. Why the charade?”

“I don’t hate him,” Cormac says. “I pity him.”

Kincaid makes a choking noise and flips his gloves in his hands. “I don’t need your pity, Cormac. I’ve found the Whorl. The girl has done her part and extricated him, and now your blessed world will unravel into the universe. My only regret is that you won’t be there to fade into the stars with it. But you can watch. Imagine everything you worked for, lied for, killed for—gone.”

“Sour grapes,” Cormac says with a false laugh. He waves off Kincaid’s threat. “Come back to Arras. I’m prime minister. Everything will be running smoothly once we tie up this loose end.”

I’m surprised when he gestures to me. “You need me,” I remind him.

“Need? Perhaps *want* is a better term. Wait, I have an offer you can’t refuse, my love, but right now the men are talking,” Cormac says, wagging a finger.

“I don’t see any men here,” I say, but they ignore me.

“An intriguing proposition,” Kincaid says, “but I’m afraid I’ve grown fond of Earth. My estate is lovely, I took the liberty of claiming it from the man with the newspapers. The one we ripped early on.”

“Hearst? I remember him. Troublemaker,” Cormac says.

“Arrogant, too.”

I can’t keep my mouth from falling open at the bizarre exchange. Their eyes shift, feet tap—they’re buying time. Each trying to determine the best way to destroy the other.

“The thing is, Arras is monotonous,” Kincaid says in a bored voice. “You employ the same standards. You add new tech to control the masses. There’s nothing *challenging* there, but you’ve created a virtual playground on Earth and I’m king of the hill.”

“So you’d unravel it?” Cormac says, and his eyes flicker to mine. He wants me to hear this.

“Yes,” Kincaid snarls, losing his composure. “I want to watch it fade away like I watched her fade before me. I want to see you burn into the sun, and I want to feel that sun on my skin every day and know that *I put it there* and that I took it from you.”

“Destroying it won’t bring her back,” Cormac says. “And without your petty dreams of revenge, how will you fill that loss?”

“There are other realms to reach for,” Kincaid says. “Space, perhaps. Maybe even death someday. This is my world, full of liars and cheats and the unwanted wastrels of Arras—my kind of people. Each more honest than a single official left in Arras.”

“And when they rise up and start a war?” Cormac challenges. “How will you control them?”

“Why control them? Kill them. It will be no waste. I have my men. They have skills, as you know. I’ll start over if I care to.”

“Caring isn’t in your vocabulary,” Cormac says. “Your ability to care died with her.”

“Is that why you exiled me?” Kincaid demands. “So I couldn’t force you to pay for what you did to her?”

“I did nothing to her.” Cormac’s voice stays gentle, catching me off guard.

“You told her lies. You turned her against me,” Kincaid says. “Why, Cormac? Why did you want her to hate me?”

“I wanted her to help you. The experiments you were doing were against Guild law.”

“What kind of experiments?” I ask, thinking of the X-rays and measurements hidden in the labs of the estate.

“Kincaid dreams not only of controlling Tailors but also of being one himself,” Cormac tells me.

“It’s the natural step in evolution,” Kincaid snarls, “and I was close until you ruined everything.”

“I warned her. That’s all. What you did to her—that was the result of your madness.”

“I’m perfectly sane,” Kincaid says. “But you awake the sleeping sword of war.”

“Poetic,” I mutter.

“Whatever you paid those scientists to do to you, it didn’t make you into a Tailor, Kincaid. It stripped you of your humanity. That’s why you killed Josin.” Cormac doesn’t look triumphant as he says it. He looks sad.

And I realize he’s right. Kincaid doesn’t hunger for power and control like Cormac does, and for the first time, I realize he wants something far more dangerous. Destruction. Total and pure nihilism. This isn’t about a lost power play. Whatever transpired between Cormac and Kincaid runs deeper and closer to Kincaid’s heart than I realized. He guarded the information from me so I wouldn’t see that his perverse fascination with change and control had twisted his very soul into something irrevocably malignant.

“What about me?” I ask, drawing their attention from each other. “What’s my offer? What will you give me?”

“You can watch it burn,” Kincaid seethes. “Everything they took from you. Everything they controlled. You’ll have a front-row seat to the dawn of a new age outside the Guild’s control.”

“A dawn of your control,” I clarify.

“I’ll share,” he says simply.

“Fair offer, but I think I have a more enticing one,” Cormac says, snapping his fingers.

The army of guards behind him shifts and out of the dark sea of black uniforms a girl emerges. She’s fair-haired and wearing combat gear like Cormac but her features are painted in lovely contrast to her fair skin, her

eyes framed by dark lashes, and although her hair is pinned in perfect curls that frame her delicate face, a few tendrils have escaped, leaving curls behind her ears.

She's my age now, or close to it, and I see the startling evidence of the time dilation we've been fighting against. I told myself a few months wouldn't matter. How old would Amie be? Fifteen. Still a girl. But as she stands before me, I see a young woman. My equal. Her bright eyes recognize me. The last time I saw her, amid a crowd in Cypress, she believed she was someone else—Riya. A result of her being rewoven after my retrieval night. Cormac has been busy preparing for this moment by creating the perfect bait. He's dangling my sister in front of my eyes, knowing I'm too weak to resist.

"Amie," I whisper. I step forward tentatively, and my eyes meet Cormac's. He nods slightly to indicate it's okay, and the part of me that wants to embrace her accepts this, pushing against the smaller voice that reminds me that nothing with Cormac is free.

My arms find her, and she hugs me back. My heart swells, knowing she recognizes me, and for an instant I'm transported to the dark cellar a lifetime ago. She was shorter then, her head rested on my chest, and now it falls on my shoulder and I smell her soap-clean scent and I remember why I fought for her. Why I needed to cling to the hope of getting my sister back. Her bright chatter and mindless gossip. The way Amie's enthusiasm could be catching. She was the sun in my world. On Earth, she could be the sun for everyone. I'd give anything for that.

We stay like this for a long moment and no one speaks, no one breaks the spell, and I don't let myself think of Cormac or his devious intentions.

I pull back and study her face, looking for signs of fear, but I see happiness.

Joy.

"Have they hurt you?" I ask.

"No," she says with a laugh. "I'm training. It's marvelous. A Spinster. Me! Wouldn't Mom and Dad be surprised?"

I bite my tongue. I want to ask her what she thinks happened to our parents, but I know better. Cormac might let her remember me, but he'll have altered her memory.

“Do you remember anything?” I ask her, my eyes traveling from her to Cormac. I don’t want to overstep this moment and have her ripped from me again. “Where have you been?”

Her eyelids flutter and she stares at me, like she’s trying to dredge up a memory but cannot.

“She’s been at the Coventry,” Cormac says, prompting her and letting me in on the lie I need to embrace if I want to spare my sister the devastation of the truth about what happened to her and my parents after my retrieval.

“You’ve been happy there.” My voice breaks on the words, my throat swelling over the lie, but I push it through. It’s better if Amie doesn’t remember Riya and the men who dragged her from the tunnel under our house. Someday I can tell her the truth, when she can understand it.

“I’m not without a heart,” Cormac says.

“I never said you were,” I respond coolly. “It’s just a small one.”

“Enough of this,” Kincaid says, walking from his entourage toward me and my sister. “Take her with you. My men can handle the rest.”

“Why would you think I would leave with you?” I ask him, pushing Amie behind me to keep her a safe distance from him.

“You want to go back with Cormac? Playing dress-up and weaving the world in a tower?” Kincaid asks.

“‘Fetter strong madness in a silken thread,’” Cormac says.

“Well done, Cormac,” Kincaid says. “But this thread of life is spun.”

“Shakespeare suits any occasion,” Cormac says, his eyes on me. “His thread of life had not so soon decay’d.”

Cormac’s message is clear to me. Kincaid is rotten, and I know then what I have to do. I feel my consciousness fading down, focusing in on the basic world around me. The strands of Alcatraz are dark and the time here moves slowly. It’s not frozen like in the buildings, but it’s still otherworldly. Unnatural. The sooner I get off this island the better. But I’m not interested in the island, I’m interested in the man advancing on me. His composition reminds me of Albert’s, and I’m sure if I looked at Cormac now with my newfound ability, I would see something similar—a mass of artificial threads neatly patched into place around the stagnant, staid individual time thread. Kincaid’s time thread is worn, mixed with newer threads into a macabre patchwork. Away from the Guild’s

technology and labs, he would have used any means to survive. How many have died so he could live?

I step forward. I've seen it done. I can replicate it now, but to do so means I have to count on Cormac's army to back me up against Kincaid's entourage, but I know that's why Cormac has drawn us here together. Why he sent Valery to lead us to Kincaid. He's been planning this moment, orchestrating it from offstage. He knows I have a choice: destroy him or Kincaid. I can't have it both ways, but now I understand my choice, what's truly at risk. I could watch Arras fade into the sky, but I'm not jaded enough not to see the thousands of laughing schoolgirls, the mothers fawning over their infants, the couples learning to fall in love. I can't destroy them to destroy one man or the Guild. There's another way, and now I'm playing with a full deck.

I won't turn back.

The realization bursts inside me, flooding me with strength and I lash out with the ferocity I felt the night I was attacked at the estate, my fingers grazing into Kincaid's very being and latching on to his time strands. I have to pull hard against its efforts to stay in place, but everything rides on this and it gives me a strength I didn't know I had. With a *pop*, it uncoils, pulling though him.

I ignore his agonized shriek and I watch the unwinding in its purest form. I don't see flesh or bone, merely the threads falling apart. The thin silver strand of his soul dissipating into the night sky along with the rest of him, until the golden strand of his life—his unnatural time in existence—fades from my fingers. By the time I regain full awareness, there's chaos around me and dust scattering at my feet.

Dust to dust, Kincaid.

FOURTY-TWO

CORMAC'S MEN REACT AS I EXPECT THEM to, engaging in cross fire with the few Tailors that dare to take them on. Most of them are smart enough to make a run for it, and a few even escape the range of fire.

"Leave them," Cormac says flippantly. He has a smug look on his face, and I hate him for it. "I knew I could count on you to make the right decision, Adelice."

"What is right?" I muse out loud. I turn to Amie, but she's backed away from me, her face ashen. I'm a monster to her, but it doesn't matter. I knew that would happen. Better now than later.

"What did you do?" she gasps, one hand reaching to her throat.

"I made a decision," I say in a calm voice. Amie thinks she wants this life, but she needs to know what it really entails. She needs to see the dirty work—the horror behind the looms, the capability of the Guild, the choices she'll have to make.

"And now you have another one to make," Cormac says. "I can't leave you here, Adelice. You're dangerous."

"And you expect me to go with you? To turn my back on my friends and lie down in your clinic, so you can make me into the perfect wife?" I ask.

"Wife?" Amie mumbles, peeking from behind Cormac.

"Cormac and I are engaged, or didn't he tell you? Like he didn't tell you what he did to our mother? Our father?" I ask, but my voice is too cold and I regret speaking so cruelly to her. Amie's as much a victim of Cormac as any of us.

"Come, come, darling," Cormac says. "I have a proposal that will be more to your liking. Your life for hers. If you come with me, she can stay with your friends."

Amie stares at him, confused and hurt, but nothing about his proposition surprises me. Using Amie was always part of his endgame.

"And them?" I ask, gesturing to my friends. "They can go?"

“All of them, even your pitiful scientist. He’s no good without you,” Cormac says. So he knows. “Good move not telling Kincaid the truth that Einstein is incapable of completing the binding without you—that you were the true Whorl the whole time.”

“I am getting smarter,” I say absently. I don’t trust Cormac to release them, but this isn’t just about my choice anymore.

“I’ll let her go, too, and you’ll return with me. I’ve seen the light, Adelice,” Cormac says. “I’m a changed man. Maybe becoming prime minister has done that. We’ll sever the worlds. We have his notes. I’m not unreasonable. You come back to my world and I’ll give them their own. We need you there, Adelice. None of them can do this, and in exchange, I won’t touch you.”

It’s a honeyed promise, coated in something sweet to make it palatable, but I taste its bitterness, the venom he’s trying to hide. I merely nod in agreement.

“Adelice!” Erik calls from behind me, and I turn to look at him. He’s watched this without a word until now, and his brother stands beside him looking set and determined. “You don’t have to do this.”

“Take her,” I cry, pushing Amie toward him. She’s sobbing, and I want to reassure her, but how can I after what she’s seen?

Erik’s face sinks and he nods. One last promise he’ll make to me for a lifetime of promises we’ll never keep.

“I’ll come with you, Cormac, and if you so much as try to alter my hair, I will rip you in half,” I warn him in a low voice.

Cormac’s face contorts. He knows I can do it. He’s seen it with his own eyes. It doesn’t ensure my safety. It merely raises the stakes of our cat-and-mouse game. And I know something he doesn’t. Something that could change everything. If it’s true and Amie has been training, our small resistance will have everything it needs, save one thing. One thing I can give them: time.

Cormac offers his arm and I take it tentatively, not daring to cast one more look over my shoulder at what I’m leaving behind—a life I’ll lose forever.

A bullet whistles overhead, cracking through the solemn moment, and I realize with horror it’s come from behind me. I’m simultaneously furious and terrified. Enough blood has been spilled here today.

“Fool!” Cormac yells as his guards rush toward us. “She already lost one father to inane valor.”

Dante. The wild card, who never quite wanted me, didn’t know what to do with me, is fighting for me now. I whip toward them and see guns raised, but they can’t take on all these men. Valery is helping Albert to safety, but Amie is nowhere to be seen. I twirl, trying to find her, but she’s hidden from my sight, lost in the chaos of drawn weapons and gunfire. I choose to believe she has fled with Albert and Valery, disappeared into the night, beyond my vision—because I have one last thing to do.

I think of the house crumbling behind them, the severed time strands. Albert wanted me to remember, to look at this world for what it was, and I had. I unwound Kincaid but I studied everything first and I’m able to call it forth now as rifles click into place and fingers press down on triggers, and with a great and sudden fury, I pull against the world around me. This conflict won’t be solved with guns, and I’d rather go with Cormac than watch the life seep from another friend, the only family I have left. I can stop the bloodshed with a single choice. My fingers find the right strand, long and wild, a lifetime of possibilities and it cracks against Earth, mutilating what lies in its wake, forming a long barrier of protection. I turn and instantly warp another spot and another, until I’ve surrounded us in protection. They can’t reach me, but Cormac’s men can’t shoot them.

Their cries are muffled, and I see the look on Dante’s face. Grim, but determined, and he waves for the rest of them to flee as I build my own cage. The only way to protect those I love is to cage myself with the Guild. I’m as dangerous to them as these men with guns.

Erik doesn’t run with the others, he walks forward and places his hand on the rift between us. He can’t reach through, and I can’t touch him, but I let my hand rest there for a moment. One final goodbye.

“Go!” I choke at the words, and even if he can’t hear them, I know he understands. He doesn’t move, not even to breathe.

“I can’t.” The words are lost in the wind or muffled by the rift, but I see them.

And so I whisper back, carefully articulating each word, so that he understands: “‘Love is not love which alters when it alteration finds.’”

He bites his lip and I see the desperation in his eyes, but then Jost comes and pulls Erik away. Jost pushes Erik away from the cage of light and time I've created.

Jost turns toward me, and although his words are lost to the warp between us, I understand them. "Find her."

I give him a determined nod. Somehow I will protect Sebrina for him.

He raises his hand and places his fist over his heart before he turns away from me—perhaps forever.

"I have missed your flair for the dramatic," Cormac says. "A little unnecessary, but if you can't control your men—"

"I'm not interested in controlling anyone," I spit at him.

"You have a world to control, so I'd reevaluate that," he says.

So this is how it will be—the niceties abandoned. A group of men cuff me and lead me toward the waiting aeroship.

"I could still kill them, you know," Cormac calls, pulling a flask from his vest. "But I won't, and then you will see that I can be merciful."

I twist my mouth, weighing my words, searching for the right thing to say, and in the end it's simply, "Thank you."

"Better manners every day," he murmurs. "Take her to my quarters, and put her hands in gages. We don't want her wandering off."

The inside of the aeroship is voluminous and austere. Great metal ribs arch overhead, and my footsteps echo across the metal flooring as the guards lead me. My hands are secured with gages, inflexible gloves that prevent the use of my hands. It occurs to me as my gaze sweeps over the thin metal walls and pressed-glass windows that I could try to escape, that I should try to escape. I'm not interested though. Cormac has no idea he's taking me exactly where I need to go.

The final words Einstein whispered to me as the house crumbled echo through my mind: *Destroy the looms. If you choose this path, others will follow you as Whorl. Embrace and trust them, but know their hearts. As you must know your own.*

I've made my choice. My destiny is one of my own choosing.

Standing, I wander to the small round window and peer out. The aeroship glides along a thin series of strands from the Interface. The world beneath us is made of blocks, gray and black in the lack of light. I

imagine the boat, fighting the waves, pushing forward against the tide, and peace settles over me.

“It’s lovely.”

Cormac’s voice startles me, and I turn to find him in the doorway.

“Lovely,” I repeat in a flat voice.

“You must enjoy it. The Interface,” he says. He crosses to a chair and pours himself a drink. The scene is familiar, but I’m not the girl Cormac used to order around anymore.

“I’m not very interested in it,” I say to him.

“The energy doesn’t call to you? The pure, brutal force of the universe?” Cormac takes a long swig, studying me over the rim of his glass. “I doubt that. Not up here, this close to it.”

I look back out the window at the tangle of threads the ship gathers as it moves across the sky as though it’s a fly caught in a spiderweb.

“So what now?” I ask. “A remap? An alteration? A wedding?”

“We will work together for a mutually beneficial solution,” Cormac says. “I’m a man of my word, Adelice.”

“Since when?”

“I’m not Kincaid. I have no interest in destruction,” he snarls. “We can work together. I’ll make you immortal.”

I nod, but I know we’re both lying to ourselves as much as to each other. I’m unwilling to turn a blind eye to how the Guild wants to control the world. “I will help you sever and bind Arras and Earth, but I have no interest in immortality.”

“That’s your foolish youth talking.” He sets down the glass, abandoning it in favor of lecturing me. “Talk to me in your thirties, when time’s winged chariot draws near.”

“My answer will be the same,” I say.

“I doubt that.”

“I only have one goal in life.”

Cormac’s head cocks to the side, inviting me to share it.

“To never be like you,” I say.

His smile doesn’t slip, but he pushes up from his chair. “You are powerful, Adelice. It’s time to accept that. Arras needs you more than ever. Things are happening there and I need you to help me achieve peace.”

“Peace,” I echo, wondering if he knows what that means. I’m not sure I even know.

“Think about it,” Cormac says. “For now, please excuse me.”

“Need a trip to the little boys’ room?” I ask.

“I have missed your wit.” He chuckles and opens the door.

She’s standing in the hall, waiting, her arms crossed protectively against her small chest. She bites her lip when she sees me, her eyes finding the floor rather than facing me. My fingers flex against the gages that imprison them.

“This is what you call being a man of your word?” I roar as he takes Amie’s arm.

“I said she could go,” Cormac says, “but *she* chose to stay.”

“You promised.” My words are as weak as the final thread holding together a seam.

“You can’t have it both ways,” he says. Amie won’t meet my eyes. “You can’t claim your own free will, and strip someone else of it.”

“You do it all the time,” I point out. I walk as calmly as I can toward the door.

Amie steps behind Cormac and my heart sinks.

“Ames,” I say softly. “You have a choice. You always will. But this life is the wrong one.”

“I made my choice,” she says.

I swallow back the words that I want to unleash. *It’s the wrong choice.*

“I’ll be here if you change your mind,” I offer instead.

“I won’t.” Her tone is set. Determined. “You’re a freak.”

Cormac’s black eyes meet mine as she turns to him. He pats her shoulder and leads her away, and I watch as my sister chooses the monster of my nightmares.

Outside the window, the Interface grows thicker. Light flashes and sizzles across the pane as the sky shifts to blinding white. On the other side lies a darkness I can finally face and a destiny I will control even as the web consumes me, taking me back to the Coventry.

UNRAVELED

PROLOGUE

THE SEA IS DARK AND LOVELY AND it calls me to its arms. I can sleep there. But as I stop fighting, the water grows heavy on my chest, pushing me down, paralyzing my arms. My eyes fly open but there is no light. I am nothing. I am the ocean. I am everything.

There is no surface near enough to break through, so I have to learn to breathe underwater. I must be reborn. A dozen glass boxes dangle from my arms, binding me to my past. Inside some, my friends are trapped, crying out for help. In others, those I love reenact mistakes I cannot escape. Fragile reminders of gambles I have lost and games I am still playing hold my arms so I cannot swim.

I can change everything if I let go first. Release Jost and Erik. Trust who Amie has become. Abandon my hatred of Cormac. I must shed the past and emerge in a thick, new skin. To rise above, I strip off the weight that pushes against me and drags me down. I ascend through the water. I say goodbye to them and with each release of the past I float higher and higher, unburdened by the debts and stories that brought me to this point, because I am free.

Autonomous.

Independent.

Dangerous.

Nothing holds me back now. This is why the Guild should fear me. I've given everything away. I have nothing more to lose. I can save worlds, and I will.

The Guild may lie in wait for me, but I am ready for them.

ONE

I WAKE TO A DARKNESS THAT ENVELOPS me in comfortable oblivion. My convictions and memories jumble into a snarl of thoughts I can't quite untangle, so I call for the lights. The bed I'm in is strange and unfamiliar, and I can't quite sort out where my dreams end and my life begins. Then I remember I'm in Cormac's quarters on an aeroship bound for Arras.

My hands are in heavy gages, restrictive manacles that prevent me from using my skills. Without access to my hands, I struggle to rise like a bird with broken wings. Through a small round window I watch the crackle of light and energy bursting through the rough barrier as the aeroship glides smoothly along the Interface, the roughly woven boundary that separates Earth from Arras. Around me is possibility—the luminous pulse of the universe surging through the golden strands. Even though my hands are bound, I feel in control. Being separated from my arguably most powerful weapons reminds me that I have one defense left—one capable of inflicting much more damage: my mind.

Cormac and the Guild have underestimated me. Now as they take me back to the alteration labs and the Coventry looms, I know I have power. I must remember that, especially as I stand alone, torn from my friends, my family, and Erik.

Flexing my fingers against the steel gages that lock them into place, I study these glove-like shackles that are meant to cripple me. The gages look like a series of rings stacked on top of one another and then melded together. They appear simple in construction, but if I press too hard against them a shock of electricity jolts through my skin. On each gage's cuff a small blue light is illuminated. Taking a deep breath, I raise my hands to my mouth and try to bite down on the latch. The blue light flashes and a stronger bolt knocks the breath from my lungs.

I stop trying to take them off.

They've left me in Cormac's quarters, which are as slick and impersonal as Cormac himself. For a man who oversees a world as opulent as Arras, with its sculpted skyscrapers and cosmetically

enhanced population, Cormac's taste is spartan. In the center of the room wait two ramrod-straight leather chairs with a steel table planted on the slate-tiled floor between them. The bed that I awoke in is perched on a low platform near the window. No artwork graces the walls. A small mirror shows me a girl with strawberry hair sharpening to fiery red, the remains of my cosmetic routine at the Coventry. For the moment my face is clean, without a trace of cosmetics—pure and pale. But for how long? My eyes reflect the question back at me. They are still the same emerald green as my mother's.

The door to the corridor slides open and Cormac enters. He's changed out of the tactical gear he wore during our confrontation on Alcatraz and into his customary black tuxedo, though he's left his button-down open at the top, not even bothering with a tie. I assume this is what he calls casual wear.

While at first he looks exactly the same in his everyday attire, as he comes closer I notice faint blue circles under his eyes and more gray peppering the hair near his temples.

"I took the liberty of having something sent up for you to eat," he says.

I'm shocked to see he's holding the tray himself.

"You know how to lift things?" I ask.

"I do most of the heavy lifting," he says, setting my food on the gleaming table.

"Poor baby. Want a massage?" I offer.

"That would be lovely."

I lift my hands to remind him that his men have bound them. "Take these off first."

"Sure. I'll go ahead and give you the keys to the cockpit, too. Nice try, Adelice. Those gages are staying on until …" Cormac's eyes wander to the ceiling as he searches for an answer.

"Until?" I press.

"I'm trying to decide if I'll ever take them off."

I plop into one of the chairs near the table. It's as uncomfortable as it looks. With Cormac everything is about appearance.

I try to ignore the plate of food he's brought me, but my stomach rumbles angrily. Nearly a day has passed since I ate. The last meal

brought to me at Kincaid's estate had been drugged and I had been warned not to touch it.

In a bid to discover why Kincaid was sedating me at night, I'd discovered the truth. He was using the time to take my measurements, planning to alter me to suit his twisted plans for Earth and Arras. Caught in the rush to get away and find the man responsible for the Kairos Agenda, I'd forgotten to eat.

We'd had no food on our impromptu mission to Alcatraz. I had been too busy trying to rescue the scientist the Guild had imprisoned there, and other than a spot of tea brought to us by Dr. Albert Einstein, my stomach has been empty for hours.

Cormac's tray is loaded with roasted lamb shanks and buttery hot bread. I assume the cocktail is for him.

Then I realize I can't eat with these gages on. Cormac can't hold out forever. If he doesn't want me to have access to my hands again, there are worse things he could do to me. He needs my ability or he'd have cut them off instead of binding them. I don't feel any better though. If it's not gages to control me, it will be a prison cell, or alteration to make me docile, which leaves only one solution: I have to earn his trust back.

"Are you going to feed me, then?"

Cormac's mouth twists into a grimace at the request and his fingers squeeze the bridge of his nose. "You're already giving me headaches."

Apparently he's not into grand, romantic gestures like feeding the woman he imprisoned. I can see the conflict with each flick of his eyes between the plate and myself, but finally he cocks his head to the side to activate his complant. It's so like Cormac to call someone else in to do the dirty work.

"Hannox," Cormac calls, connecting his complant to his right-hand man. He's been ordering around the mysterious Hannox since the moment I met him. "Take Amie to a secure room and put two armed guards in front of the door. If anyone tries to get in, I want you to kill her."

There's a pause.

"Even me," he confirms. "Assume the possibility of Protocol One until we arrive in Arras."

“It seems like a bit much to kill someone for entering a room,” I say as his head settles back into a more natural position.

“In your case there’s no such thing as being overly cautious,” Cormac says. “I should have learned that the night I met you. I’ve since learned who you really are.”

I want to tell him that I knew exactly who he was the night he came to retrieve me from my home in Romen. He destroyed my family when my parents tried to run and save me from a life locked in a tower. Since then he’d only succeeded in showing me time and again how big a monster he truly was.

“Does that mean you’re going to take these off?” I ask.

“I don’t see why not.” Cormac relaxes into his chair, smirking. “If you try anything, your sister is dead. You can’t possibly save her.”

Death threats always bring out the twinkle in his black eyes.

“Maybe I’ll leave her behind,” I hedge. “You’ve turned her into someone else. I don’t know who she is anymore or what lies you’ve told her about me.”

“She’s the last member of your family, Adelice. I know exactly what you would do for her.”

“She’s not the last,” I point out. Cormac knows that better than anyone. The Guild altered my mother, removed her soul, and sent her to Earth to hunt me. As a Remnant, she bears only my mother’s face. But she *is* still alive, no matter what she’s done. I’d recently even met another family member, someone I didn’t know existed: Dante, my biological father, who ran from the Guild so they couldn’t force him to use his alteration skills. His brother, Benn, raised me as his own and died trying to protect me from the Guild. Cormac had taken a lot from me, but he hadn’t wiped away my whole family. And there were other people I loved now, even if things were a bit complicated between us.

But despite my brave face, I try not to think of Amie. She’s close to me at last. With my hands free I have all the weapons I need to reach her. It’s possible I could enter her chambers through a window or an adjacent room. There might even be options for escape that don’t involve walking past the armed guards. But rescuing Amie and returning to Earth won’t get me anywhere. There will be no peace between the worlds—no peace for myself or those I love—until *I* create it.

“Amie may as well be the last member of your family.”

I ignore Cormac’s comment, focusing on gathering as much information as I can before he clams up again. “What is Protocol One exactly?”

“Don’t tell me you spent all that time on Earth among Kincaid and his Tailors and you don’t know,” he says, licking his lips as though I’ve provided him with something delicious to savor.

“Humor me.”

“It simply means that no one, myself included, can see Amie until we reach our destination and certain safety clearance has been granted.”

“Why can’t you see her?” I ask.

“What do Tailors do, Adelice?” He leans toward me, egging me on.

“They alter objects, and implant and erase memories,” I say.

“And?”

The answer is so obvious that it hits me like a well-thrown brick. “They change appearances.”

“I don’t know how far you’ve come with your alteration abilities. I know you can unwind,” he says. Cormac witnessed me removing Kincaid’s time strand on Alcatraz, revealing my newfound abilities to him. Now I wish I had let them fight their own battle instead of getting involved.

“I can’t alter my appearance,” I tell him, realizing that Cormac was warning Hannox that I might try to take his appearance and trick them into releasing Amie. “If I could, wouldn’t I have done it before now? To avoid capture?”

“You had access to some of the most talented Tailors we’ve ever lost to the rebellion,” Cormac says with a shrug. “I assumed you were too vain up until now.”

“And now?”

“I think you were stupid. You could have taken anyone else’s appearance.”

What Cormac doesn’t understand is that no good would have come from altering myself to become someone else. Arras’s threat to Earth would still have existed, my sister would still be under Cormac’s control, and I would still be hiding. Right now, being myself is my best asset, because Cormac seems eager to work with me.

“Do you have her bound as well?” I ask, bringing the subject back around to Amie. I picture her locked in a cell deep in the belly of the ship.

“I’m not scared of *Amie*,” Cormac says. “She won’t even know she’s under safekeeping. I would guess she’s reading the *Bulletin* or playing with her digifile. There are perks, you know, to being well behaved.”

“I find being well behaved is overrated.”

“Somehow that doesn’t surprise me,” he says. “In any case, she is secure. You can’t reach her without risking her life. Is that clear?”

“Crystal,” I mutter.

Cormac stretches toward me and swipes an access card across the blue light. It blinks red. Cormac removes the gages and tosses them next to my food tray. My dented flesh aches as I splay my fingers wide, cracking and popping the joints in my hands.

This is my chance.

I could run for it. This aeroship will be equipped with tethering gear and rappelling equipment. I could easily take out the guards, even Cormac, now that I have the use of my hands, and there’s a good possibility I could even make it to the surface. I could make it back to Erik.

But returning to Earth only puts everyone I love in more danger. It’s better to stay here and worm my way back into Cormac’s good graces.

“How adorable.” He traces a finger over my techprint. “The mark of Kairos. Souvenir?”

Despite Cormac’s near-constant attention, it’s the first time he’s noticed the mark.

“I’ve had it for a long time,” I say in a measured tone. I could brag more, talk about my rebel parents, but I know that could place Amie in more danger. Cormac is only trusting when he thinks he has total control. I can’t risk that now.

“We’ll have it removed, of course,” he says.

I silently hope that he forgets about it. I don’t want the small reminder of my past stripped from me. I pick up a fork and run it through a pile of mashed yams.

Cormac watches me over the rim of his highball. “This reminds me of our first meal together.”

“Getting sentimental?” I ask, bringing a small bite to my lips and hating myself a little for feeling hungry, hating myself for accepting food from him. Even hunger feels like a weakness. I want him to fear me.

“You barely ate that day either,” he says, swirling the amber liquid. “We had potential then, you and I. I’m afraid only one of us is living up to it.”

I snort and allow myself to take a second, larger bite. My first meal with Cormac was at Nilus Station on the night of my retrieval, when the Guild came to take me away to become a Spinster. He had insisted that I eat that night, too. I hadn’t been sure if Cormac would become a friend or not that night. One moment he seemed to want to earn my trust and the next he was threatening me. Now I knew the truth. Cormac Patton, now the prime minister of Arras, would work any angle he could to get me on his side. He made my own mother into a monster. He altered my friend to follow me. He even brainwashed my sister, Amie, into buying his idea of a perfect world. All while he stripped Earth of its fundamental elements in order to build Arras into an empire. I know he’s going to destroy both worlds unless I can convince him to find a peaceful solution. Or I finally figure out how to destroy him.

Whichever comes first.

“I still have potential,” I say finally. “And I’m ready to use it.”

“A threat?” Cormac raises his eyebrows as he takes a draught of his bourbon.

“A *truce*.” It sounds strange coming from my lips, but I know this is exactly what he wants to hear. If I’m smart I can use Cormac like he’s used me, but only if I play my cards right.

“You never stop surprising me, Adelice Lewys.” Admiration colors his voice, and I feel dirty.

“I’ve had time to think,” I say, pushing my true feelings aside. “I understand now that compromises must be made to help both worlds.”

“I couldn’t agree more.”

I muster up a smile for him. This is how I’ll get what I need. Earn his trust until he slips up or gives in. I can do this. I have to.

“There’s one last order of business I need to discuss with you.” Cormac reaches inside his tuxedo jacket and I stiffen.

“No need to be afraid,” he says. “You’re right that a truce is exactly what will bring these worlds together. And what better way of sealing our commitment to this compromise than by truly committing to each other?”

A small velvet box rests in his palm and my eyes fly to his, every bit of me willing him not to open it. But his thumb flips up the lid to reveal a ring.

“I told you before that I needed a wife,” Cormac says, placing the box on the table.

“I heard you found one,” I mumble. I abandon my fork and my meal to stare at the delicate curve of the golden band and the overlarge diamond cushioned in the center.

Cormac said we would work together, but I hadn’t thought he meant this. Not after everything that’s happened.

“She was deemed unsuitable in more ways than one.” Cormac leans forward, steepling his fingers thoughtfully. His cold black eyes stay on me.

“Maela?” I assume. She was the person most likely to ascend to the position, and the person most likely to fly into a murderous fit of rage and lose her chance. I’d seen her instability more than once while she lorded over my training at the Coventry. I relied on it during my escape, when I couldn’t reach Erik by myself. I let her push him into the tear I had created. All I had to do was mention kissing him.

“Never,” he said with a groan. “She’s too … eager.”

“She’s too cunning,” I correct him.

“Either way, Maela would be a poor candidate for the position.” Cormac laughs as though we’re playing a new game.

I’d suspected from my interactions with her at the Coventry that something had gone wrong between Cormac and Maela. Now I’m certain I was right. I’d been on the bad end of Maela’s temper while I was under her watch. She had often abused her position training the incoming Eligibles. I can’t imagine the destruction she’d have caused as Cormac’s wife.

But if it wasn’t Maela, that left a frightening possibility.

“Not my … sister?” I ask, dreading his answer.

“Much too young,” Cormac says. It should be reassuring that he sees her this way, but I also know this means Amie is still the same giddy girl

who mooned over a bakery cake on my retrieval night. And Cormac has been molding her—altering her—for over a year to trust him and the Guild.

“I had an arrangement with Pryana,” Cormac admits, drawing a long breath that says, *I’m guilty*. “My men—”

“Your Tailors.”

“My Tailors,” he says, barely missing a beat, “thought they could splice her with Loricel’s genetic material. But she’s never shown the natural talent Loricel—or you—had.”

“Pity,” I say carefully. I don’t want him to see I’m upset over what he did to Loricel, the Creweler who guided me during my short time at the Coventry. Cormac collects information the way some men collect old *Bulletin*s. But with him it isn’t a harmless habit. Cormac knows which stories—which inconsequential facts should be held on to—so he can use them against you later.

Cormac’s mind stays on Pryana, though. “I’ve placed her back within the Western Coventry and canceled the wedding.”

“I hope you hadn’t sent the invitations,” I say.

“Would it matter?” he asks with a snort.

Of course not. The Tailors under his command could remove the memory of the invitation, alter the information in the minds of the people fortunate—or rather, unfortunate—enough to have received one. Every action Cormac takes has a built in fail-safe. He never has to worry about making a policy mistake or averting a disaster because he can wipe the memory of it away.

Tailors were the nightmares you couldn’t remember the moment your eyes opened.

“Well, you are too old for me,” I say, searching for something to talk about that doesn’t revolve around that ring. In the end, I give up. “Why? Tell me why I should accept your … offer?”

“There’s the little matter of your sister. Need I remind you she’s currently in my custody?”

I shake my head. I’m well aware that he has Amie.

“Good. I knew she would come in handy, but there’s more,” he says. He straightens in his chair, ready to talk business. “The reason you should agree to it is fairly simple. There’s trouble in Arras. If we’re going

to work together to ensure both worlds survive, we need to give the people something else to think about, obsess over—and what's better than a celebrity wedding?" He flashes me a blinding smile that's meant to be charming. Too bad it's never worked on me. But I know he's absolutely right. The wedding of Cormac would be the talk of every metro in Arras. It would occupy the *Bulletin*s and the Stream for months, even years, or however long it might take to divert people's attention from what's really going on.

"You want to distract them," I say.

"I need them in their places, Adelice. Our plans won't succeed if the citizens are scared."

"Exactly what is happening in Arras?" I ask.

"Nothing that can't be handled," he assures me, but he blinks as he says it.

Except he needs a wedding—*a huge distraction*—to handle it.

I push the plate away from me and rub my wrists. I don't know how much time I have until he puts the gages back on my hands, now that he's pitched his idea.

"You're finished with your meal," Cormac says. He looks at the gages, and I sigh, raising my hands to him. An aeroship caught in the Interface between Earth and Arras is no place to try to escape. If only Cormac could see that.

"These protect me from you," he says, picking up the gages. "I saw what you did to Kincaid, which was admirable, but I'm not eager for a repeat performance. Not yet. There is another option, though."

He glances toward the box on the table. I still haven't touched it.

"If I say yes, no more gages?" I ask.

"When you put on that ring, Adelice, you'll be making a commitment. As will I," he reminds me. "To show you I am serious about our endeavor, as long as you wear that ring, there is no need for these." He waves the gages around and I look from them to the ring.

It isn't until I reach out for the blue velvet box that I notice my fingers are trembling. Are all girls this scared of a marriage proposal? It probably doesn't help that mine comes with a real till-death-do-us-part clause attached. I stare at the ring. It's flawless, but its loveliness is tainted by what it stands for: control.

Over me.

Over Arras.

“Allow me,” he says, slipping it onto my finger. “I know you think of this as a means to an end, Adelice, but remember, there is no shame in compromise.”

There is shame in lying, I think. But I swallow the words deep inside me with a frantic gulp.

“Perfect,” he says. The ring fits precisely as though it were made for me. It probably was.

I fan my fingers in front of me, noticing the ring’s weight as the stone catches the light and blazes with fiery life, sending flickers like stars around the room.

“Do we have a deal?” Cormac asks.

“The proposal every girl dreams of,” I mutter.

“I’m not getting down on one knee.”

“Thank Arras.”

I stare at him. Then I stare at the ring. Cormac needs a wedding to distract the citizens from trouble, whatever that means, but a wedding could buy me time as well. Time to figure out what Cormac is keeping from the people. Time to allow the Agenda on Earth to organize. Because time is a precious thing there, and I need to buy as much of it as I can for my friends.

“Yes,” I say, pushing Erik’s face from my mind and ignoring the twinge of fear I feel.

We regard each other for one wary moment and then I reach out and grip his hand in a firm shake.

“How businesslike,” Cormac says, and he pulls my hand up to his mouth, but before his lips can touch it, the door zips open and Hannox enters. He freezes for a moment, no doubt stunned by Cormac’s romantic gesture. Or maybe by the horror on my face.

“I’m sorry to interrupt, sir.”

Cormac waves it off. “What’s the trouble? Are those Agenda fools coming after us?”

I tug my hand from his at the mention of the Agenda, wondering if he’s referring to Dante, Jost, and Erik.

“The problem isn’t on Earth, sir,” Hannox says, pausing to let this information sink in. “It’s Arras. There’s a blackout over the Eastern Sector.”

TWO

I'VE ONLY EVER SEEN ONE BLACKOUT—when I was a child—but I've never forgotten it. The disappearance of the sky isn't something to be taken lightly, and past instances had been highlighted on the Stream as part of cautionary programming. The message in those programs was clear: stay calm. Blackouts lasted minutes at the most. At least, they were supposed to.

We had been warned about them during my training at the Coventry, the effect they had on citizens. Being responsible for a blackout was a sure way to lose your position at the loom. But a simple blackout didn't require the attention of the prime minister.

"Take her," Cormac commands Hannox, and he's out the door before I can ask him what I should do to help.

The gages are back over my fingers despite my protests and Hannox marches me out of Cormac's quarters.

"I don't need these," I say to Hannox.

"I'm in charge of your safety." His response is even, but he doesn't bother to look at me.

"And how do these keep me safe?" I ask him.

"Cormac placed you under my guard. I've been studying you for years, Adelice. I tracked you on the surface of Earth, and in that time I've come to one conclusion."

This should be good.

"The person who poses the most danger to you"—he pauses and meets my eyes—"is yourself."

I wish I could argue that point, but I can't.

Around us, officers in various styles of tactical gear rush in and out of corridors. Some carry weapons and others are in rappelling equipment. This is what a state of emergency looks like. Cormac can lie about the severity of the issues in Arras, but seeing this I know the situation is spinning out of his control. I wait for someone to give me directions but

instead I’m led to the aeroship’s observation deck, which is full of bustling crew who push past me and around me without a second glance.

“What am I supposed to do?” I ask Hannox as he turns to leave me.

Hannox isn’t quite what I expected. I’d seen him before at the Guild mines on Earth, but now that he’s up close to me, I don’t know what to make of him. He’s got a soft face with large brown eyes that crinkle in concentration. He’s not smooth and polished and slick like Cormac. But Hannox is deadly, I remind myself. I can’t trust his kind face. It’s always Hannox that Cormac calls to handle his dirty work. He must be good at it.

“Sit tight and let us observe you,” Hannox says to me.

“That’s it? I can’t … help?”

Hannox’s eyes stay soft but his words are cold as he checks the settings on the steel cuffs that bind my fingers. “I don’t know what deal you’ve struck with Cormac, but when we need your help, we’ll ask for it. We have a full-blown revolution happening in the Eastern Sector. I’m not about to parade the queen of the rebels in and trust her to help us out.”

“What if I escape?” I ask him, a burning resentment bubbling through me. But I immediately regret my question. Hannox will certainly report it back to Cormac.

“I would love to see you try to escape with those on,” Hannox says, gesturing to the gages, “but if by some miracle you do”—he turns my wrist and traces the control panel—“I’ll blow your hands off. A Creweler isn’t much use without her hands.”

“No, she isn’t,” I say. I withdraw my hands and turn away from him so he can’t see my face.

Hannox leans in to my ear. “And don’t forget we have your sister.”

I don’t respond. I keep my focus on the activity around me, trying to discern what they plan to do once we get to Arras. We’re moving across the Interface faster than I’ve ever seen before and in doing so we catch and rip at its strands, damaging many of them in the process. To my right a man is barking coordinates, his head tipped to the side, communicating via complant to someone far away. Men ascend the ship’s overhead envelope, scaling its rungs with tethers and ropes hooked over their shoulders.

“Hold on tight!” The command comes from Cormac as he whistles past me. I follow him, desperate for more information about what’s going on.

“Why?” I ask.

“Because we’re about to brake,” he calls over his shoulder.

“My hands are kinda engaged at the moment,” I remind him. This stops him and he turns to stare at me, cursing under his breath. Before I can react, he flings his arm around my waist and pulls me to him as his left hand grabs a nearby railing.

“Your hands are engaged in more ways than one,” he says as the aeroship brakes hard across the Interface, throwing me backward. But Cormac’s grip stays tight across my waist, holding me to him. He presses me close to his chest. The ship makes a sharp scratching noise as we are forced to a stop, and all around us, several men lose their balance and crash into the deck of the ship. My eyes fly up to the men who were scaling the envelope a moment ago and I find them there, clinging to the steel ribs of the aeroship. As soon as the ship comes to a full stop, they spring into action, scrambling higher, until they can touch the Interface.

“What are they doing?” I ask, extricating myself from Cormac’s too-eager embrace.

“No girls are working the looms in the Eastern Coventry, meaning we’ll have to enter Arras in an undesignated space,” Cormac explains.

“Why not have another Coventry do the work?” I ask.

Cormac rounds on me. “This event must be contained. The less people find out about it, the better.”

“But how will we get in to Arras through the Interface?”

“The men will create a passage,” he says.

“A loophole?” I’d seen a loophole before, on an Agenda trip. The temporary tunnel allowed refugees from Arras to escape to Earth, but on that occasion the loophole had been created within Arras.

“Is that what your rebel friends call it?” he asks, beginning to walk the length of the deck. I follow as he checks the crew’s progress. “*Loophole*—how poetic.”

I clench my teeth to keep myself from saying something I’ll regret. I won’t get anywhere by reminding him of my ties to the Kairos Agenda, the growing rebellion intent on separating the worlds.

“How can they do it?” I ask him, not letting myself be baited. “I thought loopholes, er, *passages* had to be created within Arras. Doesn’t the Interface prevent us from tunneling through it?”

Cormac doesn’t answer me. Instead he paces the deck, waiting for the loophole process to complete.

“I can’t create my own loophole,” I remind him, certain he thinks I’ll use the information to escape.

“I’ve seen you rip through a world to get away from me.”

“That was different,” I say. I know that the only reason my escape from the Western Coventry worked was because we were already close to the surface of Earth there.

“Perhaps you’re right. You wouldn’t survive throwing yourself through an average passage, and I’ve made certain there won’t be a similar incident in the future,” he says.

“We have a deal, Cormac,” I remind him. “I’m not running off.”

His eyes swivel to regard me for a moment before he relents. “They’ll use a machine to create a temporary slub in the Interface between Arras and Earth and force a passage through. The Guild has the only technology to do so.”

I know this can’t be true, because the Agenda has access to loophole technology. Cormac removes the gages from my hands, but I barely notice. Before I can decide whether or not to point this out to him, Cormac speaks again. “The Guild monitors all activity passing through the Interface.”

If this is true, the Guild knows about every refugee who flees to Earth, something the Agenda is unaware of. But it does explain how easily Valery and Deniel had infiltrated Kincaid’s estate while working as Cormac’s spies. Kincaid might have been the most powerful man on Earth, controlling the vital solar trafficking trade, but he had a weakness for living toys. He collected refugees from Arras for his macabre theater productions. Both Valery and Deniel had sought asylum with Kincaid under false pretenses. Deniel had used his alteration abilities to find a place on the estate, but Valery, my former aesthetician, had become Kincaid’s lover. Deniel had died before he could fulfill Cormac’s orders, unwound by Kincaid’s men, but Valery fooled us long enough to inflict serious damage. It was due to her that I was here now.

When the loophole is complete, we're separated into groups as an officer barks warnings. Given the circumstances, we have little time to get inside Arras before the loophole begins to collapse.

"Passage will be based on priority clearance," the officer shouts. "It is our mission to get these priority personnel safely to the surface. If someone tells you to run, *run*! Remember, the tunnel lacks a permanent rivet to ensure stability. That means you move fast and you move smart.

"A team has been sent in advance of group one to rivet the entrance into the Eastern Sector," the officer drones on as I half listen. "It's approximately one mile between the entrance and the exit. Move quickly, follow your leader, and get through."

I'm in the first group permitted passage into the loophole, along with Cormac. Since the advance team declared the passage safe, Cormac isn't wasting any time. I'm not sure if he's unwilling to risk being caught in a passage collapse by going later or if he's eager to get to the problems in the Eastern Sector.

I study the silvery web of protection patched over the Interface as we wait for clearance to enter the loophole. The mouth of the passage hovers next to the deck of the ship and a plank has been placed to allow us to enter the vortex. I only have to walk up the plank and into the tunnel, which sounds easy enough, though it looks terrifying. The officers leading us through carry a giant stack of metal hoops at least eight feet in diameter. When they reach the end of the plank, they pop the hoops apart and then back together. This time they aren't stacked, but fitted into an open sphere. A brass globe hangs in the center. It doesn't touch the rings. It merely floats as if suspended by air.

I've never traveled through a loophole before, and I have a million questions.

"What's that?" I ask Cormac, pointing to the strange contraption the officers are setting up.

"A bodkin."

I stare at him, waiting for a better answer.

"It's an armillary sphere. It maintains the loophole as we pass through," he says. "Stop asking questions."

A hundred butterflies take flight in my belly as we're led up to the mouth of the loophole.

We’re released into it in our groups, one surging after the other, like great waves. The leader of our group guides the bodkin via remote control as we enter the loophole. Its hoops orbit in a whirring blaze of motion, cycling continuously to create a clean tunnel for us to pass through.

At first it’s hard to keep my balance. A swirling kaleidoscope of colors spins, creating a sense of vertigo. Cormac curses as he stumbles, but I stay upright. When I stop looking at him and concentrate on the brilliant colors of the tunnel, walking becomes second nature. If I wanted I could touch the weave, change it. But that might cause the temporary passage to collapse. There’s enough clearance for us to pass through without skimming the surface.

I wonder if I slipped off my boots whether my feet would feel the tingle of electricity present in the warped strands.

This is the universe in its full glory. As we make our way through, the coarse, colorful strands grow finer and begin to blur to pure light and I know the Arras rivet isn’t far off. When I arrive at the rivet, it occurs to me what I’m about to do. I’m going back to Arras. I left devastation in my wake when I escaped this world. I’m not safe here. I hesitate in the mouth of the rivet, trying to absorb what lies on the other side.

A crippling darkness gathers and spreads along the sky, tainting the metro with gloom. It’s unnatural, like everything in this world, but I know this isn’t the work of a Spinster’s hands on the loom.

It’s the lack of them.

THREE

THE BLACKNESS YAWNS ACROSS THE SKY, extending like a floating abyss above us. I thought I knew darkness on Earth, but this is all-encompassing. Allia, the capital of the Eastern Sector, is rendered skeletal in the glow of emergency lights. It's a sketch of a metro that can't be real. If I reached out now to touch it, I'm sure my hands would meet with paper. Only the flicker of emergency lanterns gives the metro depth and dimension. I stop in the rivet, hesitant to enter this place, but Cormac grabs my arm and pulls me through.

"The power grids are offline, sir," an officer informs Cormac as he hands him a pair of goggles. "These are night optical devices that will allow you to see as we travel. They are equipped with infrared technology and will display heat signatures in orange."

"Heat signatures?" a young officer pipes up.

"Humans. Animals. Anything that's alive," his superior explains.

I take a deep breath, wondering what we'll find in the streets. The officer passes out goggles to each of us. I'm fastening mine over my forehead when Hannox snatches them off me.

"Sir," he barks at Cormac. "I think Miss Lewys should stay behind with the guard."

"I should come along," I butt in, even though I'm not sure why I'm arguing. I'm not exactly eager to explore the dark corridors of the Eastern Sector. Maybe it's that I don't like being told what to do.

"That sounds like an excellent idea," Hannox mocks. He moves toward me and jabs a finger at my chest. "Let's take the *rebel* Creweler in to meet the *rebel* Spinsters."

"I didn't bring my *rebel* handbook to distribute, so I think it will be okay." I cross my arms over my chest, and we both turn to Cormac for his opinion on the matter.

"She won't be running around unsupervised," Cormac says, and I smirk at Hannox. He might have known Cormac for two hundred years, but I'm the one Cormac wants to keep happy.

“It’s a precarious enough situation without dragging her into it,” Hannox reminds him.

“Then veil her,” Cormac orders. Hannox opens his mouth, but Cormac holds up his hand. “I’m not interested in debating this. The looms in the Eastern Sector have been disabled, but if you think her presence in the weave is a threat and you want to veil her, do it. Otherwise, get her in tactical gear.”

“I’m not much of a shot,” I tell him. In truth, I hate guns.

“I don’t want you in tactical gear to use you as a sniper,” Cormac says with a huff. “I only thought it would be nice if you survived until our wedding day.”

Hannox mutters something under his breath.

Part of me wants to flash him my ring. The part of me that’s feeling smug about winning out over the bossy Hannox. But since my engagement to Cormac is something I’m neither proud of nor looking forward to, I keep my fingers to myself.

“And her hands?” Hannox asks.

“Gages won’t be necessary. Will they, Adelice?” Cormac says. “We’ve come to an arrangement.”

The weight of the ring is heavy on my left hand as he says it. I’ve agreed to this, which means small mercies like unbound hands and trips into rioting sectors. I’m not sure if I’m coming out on the better end of this bargain.

“It’s a bad idea,” Hannox says one final time, but Cormac’s angry look silences him.

When Cormac walks away, Hannox hands me tactical gear without offering to help me put it on. I struggle into the thick black vest and scratchy nylon pants, hooking and strapping while officers rush around me. The goggles pinch my nose, so I leave them perched on my forehead. It isn’t long before the tactical teams in the sector meet us at the mouth of the rivet. Cormac speaks to them in a hushed voice, and I can’t hear the explanation of what’s going on within the sector.

When we finally set out to view the area, the streets are empty. Given the near panic of the ship’s crew during our flight, I expected looting or mobs of angry people. But the capital is as still as death.

“I thought you said there was rioting,” I say to Cormac as we ride through in a large motocade. I see no one, even though our van shines floodlights onto our path.

“There will be rioting soon,” Cormac says.

“How do you know that?” I ask him.

“Experience.” His mouth twists into a rueful smile.

“Oh.” Had there been other riots? How had they started? What had he done in those metros? I want to ask him these questions, but I keep quiet, listening to the terse conversations between the officers in the truck and paying attention to Cormac’s reaction to the empty streets.

A blackout happened once in Romen when I was a little girl. There was no warning. No way to anticipate what was about to happen. Amie was only a toddler, and we were both outside playing in the yard while our mother finished the dinner dishes. I picked blades of grass and held them to my lips, blowing a stream of air across them to create a high-pitched whistle. Amie laughed and clapped her hands while our mother watched us from the kitchen window. And then there was no sky.

It was as simple as that. In one moment I sat under the rose-tinged hues of sunset, entertaining my sister, and in the next, the world was black, blanketed in a sudden and absolute night. I remember the sounds of screaming, the wails of terror echoing through the darkness, but it wasn’t until my mother lifted me onto her hip, Amie perched on the other side of her, that she shushed me with a gentle: “Quiet now. It will be okay, darlings.”

I’d lost my screams in the dark, unaware that the sounds I heard came from my own throat. Dad met us at the stairs, and mercifully, there was still power in the house. But none of us could tear our eyes from the missing sky. It was the absence of it—how half of our reality had vanished—that made it hard to swallow. Dad ushered us into the basement and headed back upstairs as we huddled in our mother’s arms against the walls. I ran my fingers along the bricks behind her back. They were solid. They were real. They wouldn’t disappear.

I had never touched the sky. It was too far from the ground, even on my tiptoes, even when the programmed clouds floated so close that they seemed within reach.

“Are the clouds real?” I asked my mother.

She blinked at the question. “Of course, Ad.”

“But we can’t touch them,” I pointed out. I could touch this wall. I could touch her and Amie. I knew they were flesh and blood and stone, but I didn’t know what a cloud was or why the sky was sometimes brilliant blue and other times dull gray.

Now I realize my mother could have explained more about the looms and why this was happening. Instead she simply said, “No, *we* cannot.”

It wasn’t an answer, even then. It was a clue. It was a different way to look at my world. *We* could not, according to my mother, but someone else could. It was the answer that stilled my breath as a girl. It stills my breath now.

Right now, in this metro, families wait behind drawn curtains or in cramped basements, and parents offer words of reassurance. But they repeat the practiced lies of generations: *This is normal. It will pass quickly. Don’t be afraid*. And I know they say those things not merely to calm their children and stop the onslaught of innocent questions, but also to calm themselves. The population of the Eastern Sector has every right to believe this is a blip, a temporary issue that will resolve itself soon. But it’s been hours since we received the news of the blackout and *soon* must feel like a lie even to those saying it now.

“Halt!” an officer yells, and the van squeals to a stop. In the middle of the road stands a man. He doesn’t blink as our bright lights wash over him. It’s as though he’s daring us to drive forward and crush him.

A group of officers scramble out of the transport with their weapons drawn.

“PC!” an officer orders, but the man doesn’t reach for anything.

“What’s happening?” the man calls out instead.

“We need to see your privilege card,” the officer says, ignoring the man’s question.

The man steps forward, trying to see into the transport, but he’s stopped with the butt of a rifle.

“My wife and children are scared. The sky has been dark for hours,” he says.

“Return to your home,” the officer says.

I catch my breath, silently willing the man to listen.

To stop asking questions.

“Your job is to protect us,” the man says, shoving a finger in the officer’s face. “I want answers.”

“Sir, step back.” His warning is ripe with violence.

“My daughter is four years old,” the man says. “She wants to know where the sky has gone.”

Nothing about the man seems dangerous. He’s young but starting to bald and a sheen of nervous sweat glimmers on his skin. His questions come from a place of confusion, not rebellion. He’s simply scared, and I can’t blame him.

Cormac steps in front of the van, and I blink. He’d been beside me a moment ago.

“Tell her the sky will return soon,” Cormac says. His back is to me, but I can imagine his practiced smile.

“Prime Minister,” the man says, and I hear the shock in his voice.

“Go home,” the officer next to the man orders again. The command is more insistent, almost nervous.

“No!” he refuses, and my pulse jumps up a notch. More rifles train on the man.

Go home, I beg him silently.

“I’m a citizen of Arras and I deserve to know what’s going on,” the man says.

A burst of laughter slices through the air, but it doesn’t break the tense mood. Cormac is laughing. He finds this funny. A warning bell goes off in my mind.

“I’m not sure what’s funny,” the man says, but it’s not confusion coloring his voice anymore. Now he’s angry.

“I deserve to know what’s going on,” Cormac repeats mockingly. He strides up to the man and places his hands on his shoulders. “You really want to know?”

I don’t hear the man say yes, but I dread where this is going. Before I realize it, I’m out of the van and moving toward them. An officer grabs me by the waist and my hands lash out toward his strands, but I pull them back before I hurt him.

“Your entire world is a lie,” Cormac tells the man. “The Spinsters have abandoned you, and you’re all going to die.”

The man steps back and stares at him and so do I. Doesn’t he know his men will talk about this?

Before I can process Cormac’s reckless indifference, the man lunges toward Cormac, who sidesteps him. A split second later a shot shatters the air, hitting the man squarely in the chest.

“No!’ I scream, pulling loose from the officer’s arms and running toward the man.

He stumbles back, a fleeting look of surprise crossing his face. By the time I reach him, there’s a pool of blood under his body. I press my hands to the wound and he covers them with his own.

“My daughter.” His words are punctuated by gasps as airy as oxygen leaking from a balloon.

“I’ll protect her,” I promise him, but he doesn’t hear me. He stares at me with unseeing eyes, glassy as the still ocean.

“Get rid of that,” Cormac orders as he heads back toward the motocade. “I want us at the capitol building in five minutes.”

He doesn’t look at me when I follow him, but he waits for me to climb into the transport. Instead I stand in front of the van and plant my hands on my hips.

“That was unnecessary,” I say. My voice is shaky, betraying my rage.

“You have blood on your hands,” he says, gesturing for someone to bring me a rag.

“Someone should have blood on their hands tonight,” I say in a low voice. “It should be you.”

“That’s what I do to traitors,” Cormac says. “You’d do well to remember that.”

“Then do it to me,” I dare him, smacking my chest with my fist so he knows where to aim. “Because that man asked a question, and you killed him. *I ripped apart your world, Cormac*. It’s only fair.”

“Don’t tempt me,” he snarls. But it’s an empty threat. Instead he pushes me aside and climbs into the transport. Cormac needs me to cooperate with his wedding plan to distract Arras and prevent future episodes like this in the other sectors. Of course, he’s after more than a bride. He’s hoping for a powerful ally. But it will take more than threats to control me.

I don’t follow him. Instead I watch as they drag the man’s body to the side of the street. They don’t bother to bag him like they did my father. In a few hours, his wife will come looking for him. She’ll bring their daughter, because no mother would leave her young child alone in a blackout. Maybe she’ll find him dead in the street, with no clue what happened to him. And then she’ll turn to the Guild for security and hope. Never knowing it was they who betrayed her.

I’ve seen my father’s blood pooling on the floor. I dream of it. The sticky blood, black like tar, that can’t ever be erased. I’ll live the rest of my life with that memory—burned into my mind at sixteen.

His daughter will live with death, too. She won’t even have a childhood.

But as we move through the Eastern Sector another thought sends a chill down my spine.

The girl probably won’t have to live with the memory for long.

FOUR

A TALL IRON FENCE WRAPS AROUND THE Eastern Ministry, the complex that contains the sector's offices. A guard steps out and clears us for entrance while two more men open the gate and then secure it behind us. Despite the lack of power for operating the gate, the capitol offices must have some type of generator because a few electric lights blink in the windows. To an ordinary citizen they probably look like beacons of hope. To me they're warning signals.

I have no idea what to expect once we're inside. Cormac was tight-lipped after our altercation in the street. The grounds of the Ministry are lush and wild in the dark. It's impossible to tell whether people and animals are moving through the gardens or whether it's the blackness playing tricks on my mind.

We pile out of the transport and Cormac taps my goggles. I pull them over my eyes and the world is red. Despite the total darkness, I can now see everything in front of me. Cormac glows like an ember in front of me.

"We'll check the perimeter," Hannox says.

"For what?" I ask.

"Bombs, armed rebels—"

"Cosmetic-less women!" I cry in mock horror.

"This isn't a joke." Hannox's eyes narrow. "If you can't get your priorities straight—"

"You have a blackout," I say, moving toward him. "The citizens are in their homes scared. You killed a man in the street. All because some women refused to do what you told them to? Get *your* priorities straight!"

"We have no idea what to expect in there. It's standard policy to check out a building and its surroundings before the prime minister enters it, even when there isn't an active rebellion in the immediate vicinity," Hannox explains through gritted teeth. I'm pretty sure he's visualizing strangling me.

“There’s no rebellion here.”

“What do you call this?” Hannox says, waving his hands at the blank sky.

“A few Spinsters taking a break?”

“Adelice.” Cormac’s invocation of my name is a warning, but I don’t stop.

“Believe me, there’s no armed revolution waiting for you in there,” I say. It’s as though they can’t comprehend that someone chose not to obey, as though dissent could only be violent. I’m certain if a group had planned a full-blown revolution the streets would not be empty now.

“As if I would trust your insight,” Hannox says. “May I please finish my job, sir?”

“It’s a necessary evil,” Cormac says to me, waving Hannox off to finish his work.

“Everything with you is a necessary evil,” I say angrily.

“I’m not interested in continuing this petty fight.”

I’m too furious to find the words to tell him that my being angry that he killed an innocent man is not a petty misunderstanding. Instead my hands ball into fists, but I force them to stay at my sides.

“That’s better,” Cormac says, grinning at my attempt to control myself. “I’m glad you’ve finally learned your place.”

A wall of guards surrounds us, and Cormac paces the small space until the all-clear is given. Somehow I manage to bite back the told-you-so trying to escape my lips. A group of ministers wait as we enter. Circles ring their eyes and their suits are wrinkled. Cormac strides past most of them without even a glance. He only stops to shake hands with the man at the head of the line.

“Grady, what happened?” he says as the man falls into step beside him.

“The reconditioning program failed, Cormac,” Grady responds in a what-can-you-do voice.

“But how did it come to this? My reports say there’s been a full blackout for over five hours,” Cormac says. The chumminess is gone from his voice.

Five hours. It’s been less than an hour since we reached the loophole, but a considerable amount of time must have passed in Arras before the

news reached us on Earth. Days go by in Arras before the people on Earth blink, thanks to the difference in the speed of time in each world. When the Guild created Arras, it forced time to pass twelve times faster there than on Earth in an effort to quickly establish supremacy over the world they had left behind. But the divergent timelines have prevented Cormac from receiving the initial reports in a timely way. Three days have already passed. No wonder everyone is tense.

“It’s complicated. I didn’t expect you to come,” Grady admits. He tugs at the tie around his neck. It probably feels like a noose.

“You hoped I wouldn’t come,” Cormac corrects him.

“No, but I don’t think it’s necessary for you to be here,” Grady says.

“Because you have the situation under control?” Cormac asks. “You don’t, Grady. Your city is shut down. Arras relies on your sector to provide seafood as well as paper supplies. Of course I had to come. When a sector minister loses control of his entire population, his boss has to step in.”

“And he’s your boss,” I say in a mocking tone. If Cormac could have prevented this by stepping in, why hadn’t he done it before?

“Stay out of this, Adelice,” Cormac warns me.

“No,” I say, wiggling between the men. “You don’t get to come in here and act like this is all his fault. How long have I heard you whispering about problems in the Eastern Sector? If you want us to fix this, we need to address the real problem here.”

Beside Cormac, Grady turns away but I spy a smile tugging at his lips.

“She thinks she’s cute,” Cormac tells him. “Adelice, do I need to give you another reminder of my attitude toward traitors?”

I shrink back a bit and glower at him, wondering who he views as a traitor in this scenario.

“The reconditioning didn’t work, Grady?” Cormac asks, bringing the conversation back to the original topic of conversation.

“No, sir, “Grady says, and the tension between them thickens. Cormac is asserting his authority over the man by reminding him how he failed.

Grady ushers us into his office and offers drinks, but even Cormac refuses as we take our seats. Cormac sits behind the desk, and Grady is

forced to sit next to me. He doesn't relax into his seat, and from my vantage point I can see his feet are tapping nervously on the floor.

"How did this start?" Cormac asks.

"As you know, we've had some dissent among the working-age women in the Sector."

I'd heard Cormac speak of this before, on the night of the State of the Guild. It seems like a million years ago, and while I know that's not the case, I also know it's been an issue for at least two years.

"They were refusing to marry," I say out loud, recalling information Cormac had shared with me.

"They never stopped." Grady's voice sounds weary as though he's borne the weight of this for far too long. "We introduced new incentives —"

"You tried to bribe them," Cormac cuts in. "You gave them more pay, Grady. The only thing that taught them was that they could get what they wanted by being obstinate."

Grady's hands grip the arms of his chair and I wonder if he's trying to hold back from punching Cormac.

"I think that sounds like progress," I say.

"You would." Cormac dismisses my input. "How did it leak into the Coventry?"

Cormac can be dense sometimes. I think of my own mother, complaining about her boss and her poor wages.

"It became the vogue. It was impossible to determine if Eligibles had been contaminated."

Contaminated? Is he serious?

"And now we have a full-blown strike on our hands, Grady. If you had listened to me when I suggested—"

"Altering the entire population of the Eastern Coventry was not an option," Grady interrupts him. "This is a case of a few bad apples spoiling the bunch."

"A few?" Cormac roars. "Your looms are dark! Where are your good apples?"

"They can be reasoned with," Grady says. "We have some of the Spinsters responsible for initiating the blackout on the premises waiting for further questioning."

“I want to see them. What have they admitted to?” Cormac asks. He stands and heads for the door in quick, purposeful strides.

“Admitted? Nothing. They want to negotiate.”

“Negotiate.” Amusement mixes with arrogance as Cormac repeats the term.

“They’re willing to go back to the looms, Minister,” Grady says. “They simply want to discuss some possible changes within the structure of the Coventry.”

“Do they?” Cormac asks. “Unlike you, I’m not in the business of listening to the complaints of a group of women.”

“Really?” I say beside him.

“Do you have something to add?” Cormac asks me.

“Yeah, I do,” I say. “What happened to working together and finding a solution?”

Cormac pushes me against the wall and lowers his mouth to my ear. “Do not question me in front of my men. You do not understand the gravity of this situation.”

“Because you won’t tell me about it.”

“Because you can’t fix it,” he seethes. “Now shut up and follow me, or I’ll send you back to the transport with Hannox and believe me, you do not want that.”

“Yes, *sir*.” I emphasize the title. So much for working together.

“I want to see these women.” Cormac releases me and tugs at the hem of his jacket.

“Minister, I think you’ll find that they aren’t asking for much—”

“I’m not interested in what they’re asking for,” Cormac stops him.

“But—”

“Nor am I interested in what you think, Grady. You’ve let this situation get out of control. I came to fix it.”

I can’t keep the question to myself. “Then why do you want to talk to them? If you aren’t interested in listening to them?”

He stops and stares me down, his eyes as dark as the room surrounding us.

“To tell them what I’m going to do to them.”

FIVE

THE STONES ARE DAMP AS I TRAIL my fingertips over the rough walls. I recognize the smell, how it prickles my nostrils. This cell is different from the one I found myself in when I was brought to the Coventry after my retrieval. It's large and set behind steel bars. I thought Grady wanted to *negotiate* with these women, but he must still see them as a threat. My goggles allow me to maneuver the dark corridors and as we round the corner, I make out several heat sources in front of us. The prisoners lie in puddles of umber, huddling together for warmth in the cold cells, but as we approach they move toward the bars.

"Ladies," Cormac greets them. He sounds charming and relaxed.

There is an acute inhalation in the room, like each person has sucked in a breath at the same time. I wonder how they're feeling now that Cormac Patton has come to see them. Do they think he's come as their savior or do they know him as well as I do? They must know. Even the Spinsters who pretended to be blind couldn't help but see.

One of the women finally dares to speak. "Minister Patton."

"Can we get some emergency lights on in here?" Cormac asks.

There's a buzz of orders throughout the room and a few minutes later a dim light flicks on overhead.

I wonder why they need to have a holding cell under the Ministry offices, anyway.

I don't have to think long about that question.

"Ladies." Cormac's politician smile is plastered on his face. "The whole of the Eastern Sector is in terror—"

"Sir," the woman dares to address him.

"What's your name?" he asks her.

"Hanna," she says. She's a few years older than me, with an upturned nose set over a wide mouth, and her brown eyes sparkle with rebellion.

"Hanna, don't speak until I tell you to." The smile slips from his face, showing them the Cormac I know and loathe. His fingers massage his temples. I guess I'm not the only one giving him a headache. "As I was

saying, your actions—or rather inaction—have crippled this entire sector. I would love to hear your reason for abandoning your duties. You've left the entire sector in fear."

Hanna doesn't look abashed at Cormac's admonishment. She looks angry. She obviously hates him as much as I do. It occurs to me that in another scenario she and I might be friends. Except that I'm standing on the other side of the cell's bars, and I'm sure she hates me as much as him at the moment.

"We want basic rights," Hanna says. But the anger makes her voice tremble, weakening her strong words.

"*Basic rights*," Cormac parrots. "You have clothing, food, shelter, safety. The last time I checked, those were basic rights."

"We want the rights you afford other citizens. We want to be able to marry and to have our own homes," Hanna says.

"Those are privileges," he corrects her.

"And we don't deserve privileges?" Hanna bursts out. She grabs the bars and presses her face into the space between them. "We work around the clock to ensure this world functions, and you lock us in a tower."

I knew I liked her.

"*And* you live in beautiful homes, wear designer clothing, eat delicacies," Cormac starts.

"Not all of us are eager to be paraded around like peacocks." She looks at me.

That's not fair. I'm dressed in tactical gear, for Arras's sake.

"And your plan to get these things that you deserve is to ignore your duties and terrify citizens?" Cormac asks.

"We want you to listen to us."

"I am listening, and I hear what you're saying," Cormac says. "What you need to realize is that *I don't care*. Your claims don't absolve you of your crime."

Cormac has already labeled them as criminals. This can't end well.

"I'm sure the Spinsters are eager to remedy the situation," Grady says, rubbing his hands together.

"It doesn't matter." Cormac turns away and speaks quietly to Hannox, who nods gravely at commands I can't hear.

While Cormac talks to him, I wander over to the bars. Most of the girls look away from me, but Hanna faces me without blinking.

“Come to stare at us so that you can feel superior?” she asks.

I run my fingers over the cool steel between us. “I’ve spent time imprisoned by Cormac.”

“And now you’re by his side. Clearly, you’re back in his good graces. Who did you betray for that privilege?” Hanna is clearly unimpressed with me.

“I understand being angry. I’m angry, too,” I whisper to her.

“Oh, please,” she says with an exaggerated roll of the eyes. “What could you possibly have endured?”

“Death, destruction, the loss of the people I love most,” I say, and I refuse to blink. Hanna thinks she has me pegged, but she has no idea how I wound up here.

Or how far I’m willing to go.

“So you gave in to save a boy,” she says in a mocking voice.

I don’t tell her about my sister or the mother they’ve turned into a monster or the friend who escaped only by loosing her own blood in a bathtub. Hanna needs to be angry. It fuels her so that she won’t feel the fear in her belly. I know that fear. It never goes away. You can only ignore it or hide it under the fury.

But I have different reasons to play along right now. Ones she can’t understand. Hanna only sees me on the other side of the bars and that makes me her enemy.

Still, a girl might go crazy locked away in a tower day after day. Hanna and her conspirators’ perception of Arras has warped. It’s easy to believe you understand the function of your world when it’s at your fingertips every morning, afternoon, and evening. When the loom presents a piece of your world, it’s easy to believe you see the whole picture. I held thunder in my palms and wove rivers into being. But I didn’t understand what I was facing until I stood under the Interface and contemplated the reality of *both* worlds. Then I saw Arras for what it was: a parasite sucking away at the Earth.

“There’s more at stake here than you or me,” I say to her quietly. “It’s the awful truth. You think you can run from it, but there’s nowhere to go.”

“I don’t want to run from it,” Hanna says, her eyes fierce. “I want to change it.”

“You can’t do that from a prison cell,” I remind her.

“Adelice wised up,” Cormac says, and I realize he’s been privy to our entire conversation. “She and I are working to make life in Arras stable again.”

“I can’t wait to see how you’re going to do that,” Hanna says.

“It’s too bad you won’t be around to witness it,” Cormac replies.

“What does that mean?” I demand, stepping in. I don’t care what any of them think of me anymore. Not when things are spiraling out of control.

“You know how I treat traitors, Adelice. You’ve seen it yourself.”

“But she hasn’t experienced it herself,” Hanna points out. “You’ve spared her. If we were all young and pretty, maybe you’d make an exception for us as well.”

“You are young and pretty, Hanna, but I can’t forgive everyone,” he says. “Adelice will help me to heal the wounds your generation has inflicted on Arras by becoming my wife. That was the price she was willing to pay for peace.”

“Better her than me,” Hanna says, and then she unceremoniously spits at him. It lands at his feet.

Cormac takes a step back and regards the floor with disinterest. “If you want to know why I chose her despite her clear lack of respect for Guild authority, then I’ll tell you. Adelice uses her intelligence to fight, which proves to me she is capable of reason. I’m less and less sure that’s something most of you are capable of.”

“When you say *most of us*, you mean women, right?” I say.

“Don’t bother, hon,” Hanna says. “You stopped being one of us when you partnered with him.”

Her accusation doesn’t sting like it once might have. Hanna has chosen her path and I’ve chosen mine. I have the benefit of experiences that she doesn’t. Hanna is young and angry, but there’s desperation in her actions and her words. It colors her ability to think rationally. The only way I can salvage this situation is take the opposite approach. Reacting got me nowhere when it came to saving the man in the street. I can’t focus on a strategy now. I have to anticipate Cormac’s next move. It’s

clear Cormac plans to execute the Spinsters. But I'm not certain what that will do to the Eastern Sector. The blackout will continue. Food supplies will cease to arrive. How long before the people cross the borders? What will happen to them then? I have to convince Cormac to keep girls on the looms.

So even as Hanna tosses her accusations at me, they bounce off, unable to penetrate the thick skin I've constructed. I need to think so that I can plan. I need to bite my tongue. I need to play dumb until I know the correct words to change Cormac's mind.

Because I know they exist.

The other girls are watching our interaction with increasing dread. One has started to cry. Hanna is the ringleader. Several back away from her. I watch as they abandon Hanna, leaving her at the center of the rebellion.

"I will go back to the looms," the crying girl shouts.

Cormac smiles at her, but then he wags a finger. "It's too late for that. This whole sector has been tainted by disloyalty."

"B-b-but … but …" The girl stammers against the sobs heaving through her.

"Cormac," I say, taking his arm gently. "You've made your point."

"No, I haven't," he snaps at me, wrenching free.

I swallow hard and say the one thing that's always haunted me, that I've never brought up with him. "I know you are capable of mercy. You showed it to me once."

"I needed you, Adelice. I always knew you would be a Creweler," Cormac admits. "If you'd been any other Spinster, you would have shared their fate."

"What fate is that?" I ask, but he doesn't answer me. What will he do to them?

Instead he turns to the group of officers and officials surrounding him. "Protocol Two has been activated. Those with border privileges should evacuate now."

"You can't do that." Grady's face is ashen.

"I already did. The Guild can't continue to pretend this issue will be resolved. You've had two years to deal with this, Grady."

“There are innocent Spinsters here,” Grady says. “Most remained in the towers. You can’t punish them for the others’ actions.”

“I’m not,” Cormac says. “I’m punishing them for their own inaction. Five girls didn’t black out the sky. Five girls didn’t cripple a sector. Inaction breeds rebellion. And the Guild has been inactive for too long regarding this matter. I take responsibility for that. It ends today.”

“So that’s it,” Grady says, no longer trying to appeal to him. The fight has gone out of his eyes.

“Evacuate now, Grady, and try again if you can bear to show your face at the Ministry.”

“How will you show yours?” he asks Cormac.

“Proudly. Because I’ve done something important here.”

“Who has clearance to leave?” Grady asks.

“Those with border privileges. No one else.”

“But my family!” Grady protests.

“You can have another.”

“I don’t want another.”

“How sentimental of you.” Cormac laughs at his colleague, dropping his voice to whisper, “Would you have said that about your last family or the one before?”

But judging from their confused faces, Hanna and the other girls hear the question, too. I shake my head at them, a message that this is not going to end in their favor. The Spinsters thought they were making a stand. They suffered under the delusion of their own power. It’s a trap laid early in the Coventry. Make a girl feel pretty and important and she’ll start to believe it. Distract her while you lead her into a tower and strip away her rights. And never show her what you’ve hidden.

The Guild miscalculated in thinking this would be enough to keep the female population happy, though. They hadn’t conceived of our evolution. But despite their mistakes, they’d kept their most important truths secret.

While I was on Earth I discovered how far they had gone to protect their power. I’m the only Spinster who knows the true depth of their power—and their history.

“You have no idea who you are dealing with,” I say to Hanna sadly, “or what he’s capable of.”

Cormac flashes us a wicked smile. “They’ll know soon enough.”

SIX

SPECIAL TEAMS FLOOD THE CELLS. A GUARD jostles me out, pushing me against Cormac as a scream calls my attention back to the prisoners. Officers drag the Spinsters from their prison, herding them into a group. Hanna's eyes meet mine before security forces surround the girls. From the mass of black uniforms a collection of arms reach out, grasping toward freedom, but I'm pulled down the corridor of the tower and away from the swarm of girls.

Hanna's final accusatory look burns in my mind. She sees me as the problem—another girl not only controlled by the Guild but willing to do as they wish. I want to believe I'm dangerous—that my power should be feared—but who do I scare? The more I think about it, the clearer the answer becomes.

Myself.

Despite my best efforts, I'm no closer to solving this situation without violence and as I watch the chaos, knowing that there's not much time left for the Spinsters here, my composed veneer cracks, fear and guilt seeping through it.

Cormac is only a few feet away. Whatever he is planning, I can still stop it. If I invoke our agreement, I can remind him that a compromise will be a better course of action. It's the best I can do, even as a tiny voice in the back of my mind reminds me this won't be enough.

"What are you doing?" I ask. He doesn't bother to look at me. He's too consumed with his business.

"We have no choice but to institute Protocol Two," he says. "Containment of the Spinsters is necessary, and this coventry and sector have been compromised."

"Can you transfer them out to other coventries? Separate the ones who didn't rebel?" It's less a question than a wish.

"I'm not interested in keeping a bunch of traitors." Cormac stops, but he searches the room around us. To him our conversation is merely another annoying side effect of the situation.

Grady stands to the side of the action. He doesn't try to stop the guards dragging the Spinsters away; he looks frozen.

"You have to stop this," I yell at him. "You know what he's going to do, don't you? Stop him!"

The troops march the girls past us and out the door of the Ministry. I have no idea where they are taking them, but it can't be good.

"Cormac." Grady finally speaks up. "Execute them if you must, but consider the people. They don't deserve to be punished for the actions of a few Spinsters. Without the Spinsters—"

Bile rises in my throat. He's willing to sacrifice those girls to save the population. Cormac rounds on him. His face is pale and there's a slight tremor when he raises his finger to point at Grady. "And let the taint in this sector spread through the rest of Arras? If we don't contain the rabid propaganda here and now, it will be Protocol Three next."

"It will never come to that," Grady says, but he slumps against a wall as if the weight of this possibility is too much to bear. "You've never been able to make hard decisions, Grady. I've made this one for you. You're absolved for now." Cormac waves a hand at him, shooing him in the direction of the exit. "Leave Allia before it's too late. I've ordered emergency rebounds into the adjoining three sectors and the termination of every Spinster in the sector."

Grady's face is slack, guilt hanging from it like oil pooling in a rag. Cormac may believe it's easy to walk away, but I feel the heaviness in the air. No one can justify what's happening here today. No one will be pardoned.

"What will happen to them if you order this? Who will work the looms? What will happen to all those innocent people if the Coventry sits empty?" I ask Cormac as Grady ambles out of the room. Grady made it sound as if everyone would be punished for the blackout.

"There's no *if*. It's done. You don't need to worry about it." He's too busy sending messages on his digifile to even look at me.

"Is that how this is going to work? I ask a question and you pat me on the head and send me back to the kitchen?" I plant my hands on my hips, hoping to appear defiant.

"I'll probably swat you on the ass, actually," Cormac says, grabbing my arm to pull me in closer, "especially if you take that tone with me in

public.”

“If you think I’m going to be an obedient little wife—”

“That’s exactly what you’re going to be,” Cormac roars. His hand flies up in the air, but I don’t shrink away from it. Our eyes meet and there’s a fire burning behind his usually cold eyes. He doesn’t strike me though, he merely waves toward a group of guards. They part to reveal Hannox, who pauses to nod at Cormac.

“You two should get married,” I tell Cormac as Hannox heads in our direction. “You clearly have a very special relationship.”

“You and I will after two hundred years, too.”

“Oh, *promise*?” I ask, no longer trying to bite back the heedless spite that comes naturally to me. Even though I know it’s reckless, I can’t stop myself now. Cautious words and gentle reason have gotten me nowhere with Cormac. It’s as though he can’t even hear me.

“There’s something you should understand now, Adelice,” he whispers in my ear. The urgency of his words and the heat of his breath raises goose bumps down the back of my neck. “I am the one with power in Arras.”

“I have talents of my own,” I say.

“And they are mine now,” he replies. Hannox appears beside us and Cormac points to me. “Get her to the transport. We’re leaving for the Northern Ministry shortly.”

“I’ll have her transported back to the Western Coventry, and—” Hannox begins.

“No.” Cormac stops him. “She stays with me.”

Hannox lowers his voice. “Do you think that’s a good idea?”

“Do not second-guess me, Hannox,” he snarls.

Hannox’s jaw tightens and he glances briefly at me before snapping off a salute. “Yes, sir.”

“Take her to the transport.” Cormac shoves me toward Hannox and I stumble into his arms.

I’ve overheard enough exchanges between the two men to know things are tense between them because of me. The funny thing is that in some ways Hannox is a lot like me. We’re both at the mercy of Cormac, a man who thinks a relationship consists of ordering the other person

around. It’s also clear that I’m not going to get any answers from Cormac about what’s happening here.

As soon as Hannox leads me away, I ask him what’s going on. Maybe Hannox can see that we aren’t so different, too.

“If Cormac wouldn’t tell you, why would I?” he asks.

“Cormac won’t tell me because he thinks my ignorance gives him the upper hand.”

“And you don’t think it does?”

“I can’t possibly stop him,” I explain as he marches me out the exit of the Eastern Ministry.

“For the first time, I agree with you. Remember this: Cormac’s fuse is considerably shorter these days,” Hannox warns me. He gestures for me to lead the way, ending the discussion.

Outside the building, two shallow pools run the length of the path leading to the entrance. On each corner of the pools fantastical creatures with long hose-like extremities extending past marble spikes spray water. It ripples together, immediately becoming part of the pool. The fountains are like the coventries: both provide material directly to the source, parts flowing into one whole.

“Elephants,” Hannox says beside me.

“I’m sorry?” I say.

“The animals are elephants,” he tells me. “We brought some of every animal from Earth here initially. The elephants were my favorite.”

“What happened to them?” I ask.

“Some animals died, others evolved with the changing conditions, and others were deemed unnecessary.”

“And these?” I ask.

“No one saw a use for elephants. If an animal served no useful function, it was removed to allow Arras to prosper more efficiently.”

“And elephants have no purpose?”

“I guess not.” Sadness colors his words. Hannox doesn’t speak again until he hands me off to the security guard waiting by the fleet of armored transports near the Ministry. Hannox didn’t strike me as the friendly type when I first met him and I’m not sure why he would volunteer such a peculiar detail now. But sentimentality does strange things to people, I suppose.

As soon as Cormac joins us, we're evacuated out of the Ministry's emergency rebound chambers directly into the Northern Sector. But we don't go to the Ministry offices as Cormac insinuated earlier. He still hasn't given me any answers about what's going on. Instead we're whisked through the metro in a motocarriage.

I take a deep breath and push the words out of my mouth that I don't want to speak. "I think there is room for compromise regarding the Eastern Sector. You don't have to destroy it."

"There is no compromise," Cormac growls. "Our partnership doesn't extend to the governance of Arras."

"I thought you wanted someone to help you control the situation on Arras," I say.

"I do, but I'll tell you when and how you will be necessary for that purpose." He tugs at the vest strapped tightly around his neck.

"Then I'm not sure why you brought me here," I say. I don't shrink away from him even as he presses closer to me. There's a violent electricity in the air between us. One of us could snap at any moment, and I can't say how much longer I can play nice.

"Because you've never been able to see the big picture." His breath stings my nostrils as he gets in my face. "If this taint spreads through Arras, Earth will die along with it. I'll be forced to use more of its resources to rebuild our world."

"And the only way you can stop this threat is to destroy everything you built here?"

Cormac grabs my wrist so forcefully that it feels as though my bones will snap. "I have this under control."

"Are you sure?" My question is soft.

"Never presume that I'm not in control." His words are firm but his eyes tell a different story. He can't hide the fierce panic blazing in them.

"There are a lot of innocent people in this sector," I reason with him. "Are you going to desert them?"

His voice lowers to a whisper. This point is meant only for me. "Tell me, Adelice, how do you know when someone is innocent? Because two years ago I was called to a retrieval gone bad, and I walked in ready to face a traitor. And do you know what I found? A scrap of a girl who couldn't run fast enough to get away." Cormac trails a finger down my

throat, and my hands curl into fists. “You looked innocent, and what a fool you made of all of us.”

“You’re wrong,” I say in a quiet voice.

“You were innocent?” he asks.

“No, about me not seeing the big picture. It’s not that I don’t see it. It’s that I see a different one than you.” I pause, waiting for him to interrupt, but for once he’s listening to me. “You’re looking at the past, Cormac. Your world is falling apart while you squint and pretend the big picture isn’t deteriorating rather than face the truth.”

“And I suppose you’re going to enlighten me?” he asks with a scoff.

“I can’t do that, which is why you need me. You’re holding on so tightly that you’re strangling Arras. Call off the protocol and we’ll figure something out together.”

Cormac hesitates, his black eyes fixed on mine, flickering like he’s trying to read a secret code. He won’t find anything hidden there, because I believe every word I’ve said to him. “This sector isn’t beyond saving,” I continue. “Nothing in this world or the one below us is beyond saving. The fact that you brought me here proves you know that. You gave me another chance, Cormac. You can give those girls one as well.”

Cormac’s gaze falls to the floor and he straightens up, unable to meet my eyes. It’s the first time he’s backed down from me. It’s the first time I’ve won.

I try to bite back the triumphant smile tugging at my lips as he cocks his head. “Hannox,” he calls.

I think of Hanna’s judgmental eyes. She scorned my methods, but I have gotten results through diplomacy. Cormac might be a twisted man, but he always does the best thing to advance his career. Abandoning the Eastern Sector wasn’t going to earn him popularity points.

“Hold the protocol,” he says. “Wait for my orders.”

As soon as he ends his conversation, his eyes fall wearily over me.

My heart takes flight like a freed bird as we pass outside the central part of Cypress, past tall buildings and shops out to the cookie-cutter streets that comprise the neighborhoods. It’s evening and the streets are empty, lights flicker in windows, but curfew is imminent. Posted signs warn us to turn back—that we’re entering a restricted area. When we finally stop, Hannox helps me out of the back of the motocarriage. We’re

on a bluff much like the one Cormac brought me to during a goodwill tour we took together. The men speak in furious whispers until Hannox climbs back inside the motocarriage, leaving Cormac and me alone.

“Are you here to tempt me?” I ask him as he appears by my side. He’d offered me Arras once as we looked over a cliff.

“No, we’re here to witness.”

“Witness what?” I ask, suspicion seeping into my voice.

He taps his wristwatch. “Soon. I thought it was time I showed you the big picture.”

I stare out past the edge of the bluff. A metro stretches, sparkling, at the foot of it. The night is still, not a trace of wind in the air, but as my gaze moves upward there are no stars. No moon.

“Why are we here? I thought we were going to the Northern Ministry,” I ask, not wanting to understand why he’s brought me here, because I think I already know the answer.

“We are standing at the boundary between the Northern Sector and the Eastern Sector,” Cormac explains.

This information sends a chill running through my veins, but I don’t repeat my earlier question. The lights below are merely the candles and emergency flashes the population is using while the sector is in blackout. Instead I wait, dreading the answer that I know is coming.

I’m here to witness Protocol Two.

The black sky flashes rainbow. Colors streak across, lighting it in brilliant ruby and sapphire, each shade fading into another. Until it ceases to be. It’s no longer empty air. It’s more. It’s become a gaping void. The space-time around us vibrates, filling the abyss overhead with the low hum of absence. Under it the metro tremors and fades, stripped before my eyes. My mind fills the silence with screams. But would they scream? Would the people of the Eastern Sector even know what was happening to them? Did they feel their removal from Arras?

Did they know they had been cast off from life? Through the lost cries echoing in my head only one thought is clear: Sebrina is in the Eastern Sector. I’ve failed Jost again.

I step closer to the edge, and when the air stings my tears, I realize I’m crying. “What have you done?”

“I’ve shown you who is in control here. Don’t forget what you’ve seen.”

I swallow my own scream as I stare across the expanse, wishing I could explain to Jost what just happened. And hoping I never have to.

For a moment there is nothing, and I understand why Arras has strict boundary laws. Passage between sectors is controlled to ensure citizens stay where they are supposed to and don’t see anything they shouldn’t. But also because *this* might need to be done at a moment’s notice. I feel certain it has been before.

“How many times have you done this?” I ask Cormac, forcing my hands to my sides even as they ache to reach out and rend him in half.

“Protocol Two?” he asks.

I nod, my eyes never leaving the empty space stretching before us. We stand on the precipice of this world. Past us lies nothing but a blank gap in reality.

“I’ll never tell,” he says.

I round on him, leaving no room between us. “You can’t do this. There are innocent people there. There are children!”

My throat is thick with grief, and I choke on the final word, my heart splintering even further for Jost and Sebrina until I’m sure I will crack under the pressure of my guilt.

Cormac grabs my shoulders, squeezing them until my fingers start to tingle. “Do. Not. Question. Me.”

Each word is a threat, spoken in a low tone that registers only in the shiver running up my spine. He drops his hold on me and steps away, opening and closing his fingers in rapid succession as he stares into the void.

There is more wrong here than an altered reality. No one is safe under the authority of Cormac Patton.

A placid gray washes across the vacant sky and the stars reappear. As I watch, the world changes into a calm, still scene, erasing the violence that preceded this moment. Water ripples into place, flooding the space below the cliff. It is born of nothing, and it rushes in gentle waves until it reaches the edge of the precipice. Now I stand on a rocky beach instead of the end of the world, but the ocean is a lie. Now there are three sectors instead of four. Now I see Arras in a new and terrifying light.

We can destroy the world as quickly as we can build it.

SEVEN

BY THE END OF MY FIRST WEEK back at the Coventry I'm smiling, but only for the surveillance feeds that watch me. By the end of the second week, I begin placing orders from the catalogs left for my perusal. I learn patience as I try to forget what I've given up.

My freedom.

My destiny.

And Erik, who I force from my waking mind, but who haunts my dreams.

Days pass mechanically inside the walls of the Western Coventry, because I'm a prisoner here—despite Cormac's assurance that we are partners. It's not the same compound I remember coming to as an Eligible. The walls are still programmed with false windows that display relaxing settings, but the actual composition of the Coventry has changed. Now the threads that comprise the walls are knit tightly together and bound through with strange, artificial strands. Strands I can't penetrate. I wouldn't have tried if I hadn't been left to my own devices for so long that I'm sure I'm losing my mind.

My quarters are more lavish than when I first came here. Two of the walls in my bedroom are programmed to look like a window overlooking the Endless Sea. I'm not sure if it's meant to relax me or remind me I can't escape. There are five more rooms in my apartment on the top floor of the high tower, all decorated in shades of yellow. They're probably meant to boost my spirits, but the yellow is driving me crazy. There's a sunny bathroom, a buttery living room, a golden dining room, a lemony closet that could fit a small house inside it, and a second powder room, small, gray—the only contrasting color—for when Cormac comes to visit me.

I'm not allowed out among the other Spinsters, as though my rebellion is catching—a communicable disease without a cure. I suppose Cormac believes giving me a large cage to fly around in will convince me I'm free.

My staff is always changing and always silent, obviously instructed not to speak to me. Even the aestheticians who arrive each day to curl my hair and line my eyes won't chat with me. They go about their work without a word. Given what happened to my last aesthetician, my mentor, and my valet, I guess it's understandable that no one trusts me. I tried to talk with them at first, hoping they would have the information I need to break Cormac, but no one in the Coventry is interested in helping me. Cormac has made sure I have no allies or friends here. No one to help me find out the one piece of vital information I need: where Cormac stays when he comes here. Catching him asleep may be the only element of surprise I have in my favor.

I'm made up in case Cormac comes to call. It's the only information I've been given about my strange daily rituals. He's already preparing me to be the perfect wife: neat and fashionable and out of the way.

But I can tell when he's coming because my whole day shifts. Valets appear with decanters and freshly cut flowers. Maids scurry in and out, checking my supply of toilet paper and sweeping the pristine floor. New dresses arrive for my already stuffed closet. My only job is to pick one and stay out of the way of the gaggle of servants making way for the lord and master.

"Lord and master" is my new nickname for Cormac. I want to say it to his face with a sneer. I fantasize about it, but I'm starting to learn the value of some advice I once received from an old friend. I'll get more out of him if I play dumb.

By the time he finally arrives, I've had to reapply my own lipstick. Cormac bursts through the door to the apartment with the air of a man who owns the place.

He does, but it doesn't make it any less rude.

I watch as he loosens his bow tie, leaving it to hang askew against his unbuttoned collar. His fingers press into his temples as they often do these days. If I was meant to be a wife, I would be waiting with a cocktail poised in my hands, but I let the valet pour it. Cormac drinks longer draughts with each visit, a sign that his stress level is rising. We never talk about Arras or his job. I tried at first, but it became clear he no longer intends to utilize me or my skills. Now I'm left to play the role of the dutiful wife until I can gather the information I need to truly effect

change in Arras, beginning with Cormac himself. The more secure he feels the closer I can get to him.

We sit across from each other at a mahogany table too long for two people. The salad arrives and I spear the tender spinach leaves with unnecessary force. He doesn't notice.

"Headache?" I ask him. I focus on sounding concerned, even though the question unnerves me. I can almost see the edges of him fraying away and I'm not certain if it's actually happening or it's my imagination.

"I'm fine," he snaps, taking another swig from his drink and slamming the tumbler onto the table.

"Will you be staying long?" Despite my casual tone, my heart pounds like a drum as I ask.

"I'll leave in the morning." But to my disappointment he says no more about his plans.

"How was your week?" I ask, trying to channel my mother and how she spoke to my father at the dinner table.

His jaw tenses and he reaches for his glass again. It's empty and he's dismissed the valet, which means he'll be forced to speak to me. He twists his hands together, cracking his knuckles, each one popping ominously in the quiet room.

"I'd rather not discuss work."

"But I'm so *interested* in your job."

"You want to know, Adelice?" he asks, and I nod, stunned by his offer. This is the first time he's been willing to speak directly about the situation. "Containing the situation regarding the Eastern Sector is becoming impossible. Most of our seafood as well as paper goods traded through that sector. We'll have to expand another sector to fulfill those needs and that means opening up new mining sites on the surface and finding more girls to work in the coventries at a time when Eligibles have become scarce."

"It is a shame what happened in the Eastern Sector," I murmur.

"I don't deal with traitors." There's murder in his words.

"Which makes me feel fortunate," I reply in a gentle tone. I have to remind him that he can be merciful, because he seems to have forgotten.

He ignores the comment. Of late he's been less argumentative, less quick with his insults. If I didn't know it was impossible, I would say his

job is killing him.

His head tilts to the side to take a complant call. This is the only way I have been able to learn things: that the rebellion on Earth is still strong, that Amie is being kept in the Northern Sector. The casual asides and conversations I overhear during our infrequent dinners paint a rough picture of what's happening within Arras and on Earth. He often listens for long periods on these calls, nodding solemnly, and that is how I know things are slipping from his control.

"Lobster is not my priority right now," he snaps, angry again. "I don't care what concerns it's raising. If it's that big an issue, do a full clean of the public. They can't miss something they don't know about."

Shellfish have never been so dangerous. Now everything feels like a risk. Each morsel on my tongue. Each casual joke. Perhaps it's only because I'm close to him that I see how the questions have become fissures in his foundation. How long will it be before they cause him to crack?

Cormac pushes his full plate away and calls for the next course. I manage a few more bites of salad before the plate is taken and a miniature tureen of soup is placed in front of me. As soon as I lift the lid, I can tell from the layer of gummy, melted cheese that it's French onion—Cormac's favorite. He knows I dislike it. I pick at it with my spoon.

"You aren't eating your soup," he says.

"I'm not fond of onion soup," I say as mildly as possible. Silently I add, *I hate it, and I hate you*.

"It's a delicacy. Onions are scarce."

"They are? I haven't noticed any shortage of onions."

"Because I ensure *you* don't go without," he says. Miraculously, he's eaten almost his entire bowl already. I shouldn't complain since it's one of the few things he consumes without alcohol content. "That is my job."

"Our job is to do what's right for Arras and Earth." It's a simple reminder, not a warning. Cormac brought me here to be his partner. I hold my gaze level with his even as he drops his spoon into the empty tureen. It clatters ominously against the porcelain.

"I wondered when you'd raise this issue again."

"Issue?" I repeat. "Cormac, people are dying. Your own people. We need to offer them a chance. I've seen the mines. You know this situation

isn’t sustainable—”

“You saw the mines when you were out playing rebel, so pardon me if I ignore your anecdotal evidence.”

“Are you telling me there isn’t a problem?”

“I’m telling you it isn’t your place to fix it.”

Blood roars in my ears. It’s just like Cormac to bring up my place—it’s my weakness. The one thing that I can’t pretend to tolerate. “This wasn’t our deal,” I remind him. “I came to help you, not sit around.”

“But you’re so good at it,” he says.

As if he knows what it’s like to pretend, to play at life every second of the day.

Without thinking about it, I lift my full tureen and fling it across the room. The porcelain shatters against the wall, spraying stringy onion against the smooth, golden paint.

My hands splay against the wooden table and for a moment I consider using them. I could unwind him, wipe him from existence like he casually erases those who threaten him, but I won’t make it out of here alive if I do. Cormac has collateral to ensure my good behavior, so I scratch my fingers across the wood’s grain to stem the trembling in them.

Cormac presses the com near his end of the table, ignoring me. “Next course, and send a maid to the dining room.”

“But then she’ll know about our domestic problems,” I say.

“I’ll have her removed when she’s finished cleaning up your mess,” he says, and I fall back against my chair.

This is why I’m kept alone, because I’m always screwing things up for innocent people like Jost and Enora. The maid enters the room and gawks for a split second at the wall, but she replaces her surprise with practiced indifference and goes about cleaning up the soup.

“It slipped,” I call to her. “I’m terribly clumsy.” I keep my eyes on Cormac as I speak and he nods once like an approving master. I am but his humble servant once more, like everyone else in Arras.

Once the maid leaves I wait for him to make the call to have her altered or removed, but he doesn’t place it. I’ve performed to his satisfaction.

The main course is a selection of vegetables—carrots, potatoes, a squash of some sort—in a heavy tomato sauce. The first bite reveals

complex tones of red wine and I savor it, before pointing out the obvious.

"There's no meat."

"I'm trying to eat less of it. Doctor's orders," he explains.

"You're immortal."

"I am not immortal."

"You've used other people's time threads to stay alive for hundreds of years," I argue.

"That's not immortality."

"What is it then?" I ask.

"That's privilege."

It must be nice to be a man.

"And privilege allows me to choose such spirited company," he continues.

I smile at him. "I can throw this plate against the wall if you like."

"There's been enough collateral damage for one evening, I think."

I shrug and pretend to pick up the plate but he doesn't crack a smile of his own. The Cormac who could appreciate my spirited company seems to be fading with each dramatic new development in Arras. At least the old Cormac was fun to fight with. Now his behavior is unpredictable.

"Despite your behavior this evening, I have a present for you."

"It's not my birthday," I tell him. Still no smile.

"You missed two while you were away," he reminds me. "I'm catching up." Now he is smiling, acting sweet, his attitude totally reversing in seconds. I can't wrap my head around it.

"Does that count?"

"I'm having it brought with the dessert course," he says.

"Is my present edible?" I ask. Chocolate might be worth getting excited over.

"Generally it's considered poor taste to eat one's presents."

"Unless it's chocolate."

"It's not chocolate."

"Damn."

When they arrive with the final course, my dessert is placed in front of me. I can't stop staring.

But my present won't meet my eyes.

“Amie will be residing at the Western Coventry for the foreseeable future,” he says. I look to Amie for a sign that she’s happy about this, but she’s watching her plate.

“What do you think?” he asks.

“You said it wasn’t chocolate. There is clearly chocolate on this plate,” I say, smiling.

“The dessert is chocolate,” he says.

“Amie loves chocolate.” It’s the only thing I can think to say in this moment. Her eyes flicker up to me and she gives me a tentative smile as though a real one would be too costly. She can’t be here. Amie is a means of distraction.

“I see you have that in common,” Cormac says. He gestures to the desserts in front of us—*torta di cioccolato*. The same as at my first meal at the Coventry. Now I’m eating it with my sister. The sister who was never supposed to wind up here.

“It’s delicious,” Amie says in a polite, if small, voice.

“There’s more. Don’t be shy about it,” he says. “My girls are too skinny.”

My stomach sinks at the way he casually throws out *my girls*. Neither of us belongs to him, yet we’re both in his possession.

“What else do you like to eat?” I ask Amie, at a loss for what normal conversation would consist of between us. We can’t talk about the last two years of her life, and I have no clue what lies Cormac has fed her about me. But I do know the surest way to lose my sister is to try to find out. The last time I saw her, she called me a freak. I’m not sure if time or alteration has softened her toward me, but I can’t risk my second chance with her now.

“Curry,” she says, her lips turning up at the edge again.

“Me too.”

“And I like the onion soup.”

Cormac smirks at this revelation. I don’t tell her what I think of it. We manage a few more minutes of awkward conversation, but it only serves to remind me of the rift Cormac has created between us.

Once she had been my sister. Then she was Riya, a little girl rewoven into another family, and now she is here—Amie again. But not my Amie. She would never be my Amie after what they had done to her. She was

too quiet, her bubbliness replaced by a timid subservience. If my parents hadn't trained me to resist the Guild, is this how I would have wound up: an obedient girl locked away in a tower?

When the plates are cleared, the two of them stand to leave my quarters and for a moment I want to ask Amie to stay. There's more than enough room and more can always be made. But I know Cormac will never allow it. He'll oversee our interactions, listen to our conversations, and chaperone our time together. He can't trust me not to undo all the work he's put into Amie.

"Will I get to see Pryana soon?" Amie asks Cormac.

"Of course. She was asking about you," he tells her. Amie bounces a little, clapping her hands, and I'm taken aback. Maybe the Amie I remembered wasn't gone. Behind her Cormac smiles at me, revealing rows of perfect teeth.

I can't bring myself to ask her about Pryana, the one person in the Coventry who has a real reason to hate me. I'd been responsible for her sister's death, at least in Pryana's mind. She couldn't see the lesson Maela wanted to teach us when she ripped most of an academy from Cypress: no one is safe from the Guild, and those at the loom least of all. Pryana had never forgiven me for my inaction. In truth, I've never forgiven myself, either.

Amie is led away from my apartment, to her own quarters, and I watch her go, wishing I could think of something better to ask her than what foods she likes now. But the questions I have for her can never be asked in front of Cormac.

Cormac pauses at my door, sliding his bow tie off his collar. For one horrible moment I think he's going to kiss me as he leans in, but instead he whispers, "Consider my present a reminder of what you have to lose."

I let him leave without bothering to point out that I've already lost her, but when the door closes behind him I rush to the bathroom. It's still the only place they don't watch me. I reach under the sink and feel around the pipes until my fingers close over the blade. I hid it in my sleeve at my first dinner when I returned to the Coventry, scared and uncertain of what to expect. But now I'm not thinking about defending myself, I'm considering how and when to strike.

I can’t unwind Cormac, especially now that Amie is finally close. Attacking him like that would only undermine Arras’s situation, and I don’t have everything I need yet. I have to wait for the right opportunity—keep playing along until I can access the alteration information I need to fix my mother and recover the soul strand I hope is kept somewhere in the Coventry’s repository. Once I do that, I’ll need to incapacitate him to put my final plan into place. Arras needs a rebirth and it must begin with Cormac. He must change. If he refuses, I can change his mind for him. I settle onto the floor, the knife cradled carefully in my hand. It reflects the image of my engagement ring, and I choke back a scream.

With Amie here I’ll have another source of information. She will hear things spill from his lips, and if I can earn her trust I will learn those secrets from her. But to do that I must trust her as well. Cormac may have twisted her to his purposes, but the old Amie is in there and I know how she works. I know her heart as well as my own. Cormac thinks he has the upper hand, but two can play this evil game.

Albert’s words echo in my memory:

Destroy the looms. If you choose this path, others will follow you as Whorl. Embrace and trust them, but know their hearts. As you must know your own.

EIGHT

I'M UNCERTAIN WHEN I'LL HEAR FROM MY sister. I'm sure she's still scared of me after the night on Alcatraz when I unwound Kincaid, but the very next morning a note arrives. She's arranged for us to have a fitting for new gowns the next day, something I'm not looking forward to. But it's the first time I'll have alone with her since my retrieval, so I go with the flow and agree to host it in my overlarge quarters.

As soon as she arrives with Pryana at her side, I know this is a mistake. Pryana's eyes travel along the walls of my living room, taking in the upholstered sofas and carved tables, all the essence of elegance and wealth.

"Aren't *you* moving up in the world." Pryana isn't asking me a question. It's merely an observation—one that reeks of annoyance. This should have been her life.

"It's not really my taste," I say, leading them through the apartment to the bedroom. My closet is preconfigured for fittings, with mirror-lined platforms and ample space to work.

Amie dashes in and starts plucking gowns from the racks, holding them up to her slender figure as she eyes herself in the full-length mirror.

"I don't think you're supposed to have taste as Cormac's wife." Pryana speaks in a quiet voice that only I can hear.

"I'm not terribly interested in mirroring my … fiancé's tastes," I say.

"How modern of you," Pryana says. She wanders through my closet, picking up heels from the shoe racks and examining them. "And stupid."

I snatch the shoes back from her. "I'm known for my abstinence."

Before the nastiness can escalate between us, Amie coughs politely. I don't want her caught in the middle of our feud, especially since I can't trust Pryana's motivations for getting close to her. But Amie might as well know how Pryana and I feel about each other.

The seamstresses arrive and maids take our dresses, hanging them to wait while we're measured and sized. Standing with my sister and my old enemy in nothing more than a wispy slip, I feel surprisingly vulnerable. I

thought I would outgrow feeling awkward around Pryana, but she's still as poised as ever. One thing I'm definitely not.

"I love the lace on your hem," Amie says, darting over to study it. "I think it must be Chantilly."

It's such a silly thing to notice, and yet some of the tension in the room evaporates.

"Amie knows everything about textiles," Pryana explains to me after I give my sister a curious look.

"If I don't get chosen as a Spinster," Amie whispers to me, "I want to be assigned to make the dresses."

I smile at her. For a second, she's five years old and we're back in our living room in Romen, splayed out on the floor, watching Spinsters stroll the purple carpet at the State of the Guild address.

We were innocent then, seeing only the beautiful surface of Arras's elite class. Knowing Amie still studies dresses makes me feel as though a balloon filled with happiness is inflating inside my chest. Somehow, even with everything she's been through, this hasn't changed. It brings me hope.

"You would make beautiful dresses," I tell her. *And you'll be safe doing it,* I add silently. No one would spare a second thought for a seamstress.

"Perhaps she'd make a better Spinster," Pryana suggests.

"Oh, I still want to be a Spinster," Amie says, grabbing my hands. "Don't worry, Adelice. I'll make you proud."

Behind her Pryana raises an eyebrow.

That's about the last thing that would make me proud, but I don't say this in front of the group. To my surprise, the same concern seems to be reflected in Pryana's eyes.

They could only spare two seamstresses for our fitting and Amie insists on watching Pryana and me go first.

"This is my favorite part. I like to learn how they do it and it's hard while you're the one being fitted," she explains. Pryana and I glance at each other but we don't argue with her. I climb onto the platform and a girl begins measuring my arms. Pryana stands directly across from me and it's like looking in a warped mirror as the seamstresses stretch the tapes across our limbs. Over our busts. Around our waists. Pryana not

only seems older to me now, if only slightly, but I realize, as we stand parallel to each other, that she looks older as well.

Pryana isn't the girl she was when I met her during orientation. Not anymore. That first day Pryana was wild, asking questions without pause and fluttering her eyelashes at the valets and officials. She was everything a Spinster *could* be. She believed in her role here, and her right to hold it. Now she's composed and polished. But underneath the veneer of self-assurance something is broken. I know how this happened, of course. I know she was set to be my replacement both as Creweler and as Cormac's wife. For a girl with as much ambition as Pryana once displayed, rejection must have destroyed something vital in her.

But she isn't trying to kill me. At least I don't think she is. It's a start.

"You've lost weight," the seamstress says to me, checking her chart. "It's been too long since your last fitting."

The measurements on file are not that old. I stood on a platform like this less than four months ago by my time, preparing to escort Cormac to the State of the Guild, but to the seamstress those measurements are two years old. A lot of time has passed in Arras since I escaped to Earth. But for me, I'd only been gone for a few months. I couldn't exactly explain that to the seamstress.

"She must not be eating enough," Pryana says, and for one second there is a flash of the old Pryana, the one who could be equal parts clever and cruel. A sudden thought sends a chill up my spine: Why hasn't Cormac altered her memory or wiped it completely?

The seamstress is encouraged by Pryana's participation and continues: "I can't understand why they would let you go this long between fittings, especially with the amount of traveling you'll be doing soon."

"Traveling?" I ask.

Amie looks up from the chart she's swiped from the seamstress and laughs. "Didn't Cormac tell you? This was his idea. He said you would need appropriate clothing for your trips."

They all wait for my reaction but I shrug. "He's not the most talkative."

"Not lately," the seamstress says, popping a pin from between her gritted teeth and fastening a swath of fabric around my waist.

“Maybe Adelice and Cormac are too busy to talk,” Pryana suggests. Amie looks horrified but the seamstresses giggle.

“Don’t,” Amie warns. “You’ll make me sick.”

“You aren’t excited about the wedding?” Pryana’s seamstress asks Amie.

Amie looks torn between shaking her head and nodding. “I’m happy for them, but Ad is my sister and Cormac is like my father.”

A wave of revulsion tumbles through my stomach. *Like my father*. Cormac is the reason she has no father. He took that away from her and now he dares to assume the role. I know better. Amie is a pawn—as expendable as anyone else in this twisted game. If he ceases to need her, she’ll be tossed down to Earth or left to waste away in a coventry without a second thought. I can’t imagine him expending enough energy to love a child.

“That does make things … complicated,” the seamstress says. I wonder if my relationship to Amie is common knowledge or not.

“But your bridesmaid’s dress will be beautiful,” Pryana says, directing Amie’s attention away from the painful topic. “And I imagine you’ll probably wear it on the purple carpet.”

“Do you think so?” Amie practically squeals the question.

“I’m sure the wedding will be a gala event.”

“What if I’m not invited?”

No part of me is looking forward to my nuptials with Cormac. But despite that, there is a little part of me that can see Amie fussing with my train and holding my bouquet.

“You’re invited,” I say. If I actually go through with the wedding, I dare Cormac to tell me my sister can’t come.

“Oh, thank you, Adelice.” Without thinking, Amie lunges forward and hugs me. It catches me off guard and before I can enjoy it, she pulls back, wincing. “Sewing pins!”

“You might want to save the hugging until I’ve finished,” the seamstress says.

“Did I miss the hugging?” a voice calls in from the bedroom. I don’t have to wait to see her to know that voice. I’ve heard it in a dark cell and in a quiet salon, whispered in my ear and shouted across a room.

She enters and I note she still has the violet eyes, but she's cultivated a striking streak of gray in her raven locks. Other than that, she doesn't look a day older than when I left. Apparently she's aging gracefully and *slowly*.

"What a surprise, Maela," I say.

Amie freezes for a moment and I can't figure out why. For a second I want to grab Maela and demand to know what she's done to my little sister. I've borne the brunt of Maela's anger before. I know the twisted feats she's capable of. But instead I press my scarred fingertips together and muster up a false smile.

"I heard I was missing a party, and you know how I love parties." Her voice is full of trills and bells, masking the darkness she hides. A darkness that sneaks up on you before you realize you're in danger.

"We should have invited you," Pryana says apologetically, but I don't believe for a moment that there's any love lost between them.

"I am your mentor," Maela reminds her.

That's new. Pryana had been assigned to someone else when I was here last.

"You *were* my mentor," Pryana corrects her in a gentle voice. The whole interaction is strange. Maela displaying her usual penchant for the dramatic interpretation of events while Pryana stays collected, even distant.

"She pretends to be Creweler for a few months and forgets the little people who helped her get there," Maela says to me.

I wonder what Maela thinks of me, if she's been allowed to remember our past. Regardless, she clearly still hates me.

The activity continues in the room, but the seamstresses have slowed their progress, obviously not wanting to miss anything that passes between the three of us. They listen, holding their breath like the pins clamped between their teeth.

"Are they designing your wedding dress?" Maela asks. Her voice is sugary like too-sweet tea, and equally hard to swallow.

I shake my head. "Not yet. We still have plenty of time for that."

"Oh," she says in a thoughtful voice. "I heard differently."

Trust Maela to come in and act like the most important woman in the Coventry. She behaved the same way when she oversaw my brief

training on the looms. I know better than to believe a word she says.

“There are plenty of rumors flying around the Coventry these days, Maela,” Pryana says, almost as if she’s coming to my defense. Apparently we both now view Maela with the apprehension she deserves, but that doesn’t make us friends yet.

“I came to speak to Adelice,” Maela says, not rising to Pryana’s bait.

“You’re in luck then,” I say, tilting my head in invitation.

Maela’s lips purse tightly as she glances at the other people in the room. “It hasn’t been announced officially yet,” she says with an emphasis bordering on warning, “but you’ll be hosting a loom demonstration at the end of the week.”

My heart slams against my chest and it takes every ounce of willpower not to smile, a reaction I don’t quite understand. “For whom?” I manage to ask as my fingers begin to tingle.

Maela’s lip curls up at my reaction. “For the Stream. Cormac wants to show you off.”

The excitement leaches from me slowly, fading out until it reaches my twitching fingertips and is replaced by a chill that numbs my body. A distraction. He wants to use me as a distraction, and then I’ll be locked away again.

“I’ll be overseeing the filming,” Maela continues.

But I already knew Cormac wouldn’t be there. Something has his attention elsewhere—something terrible if he’s using me as a decoy to distract Arras.

“Thank you for letting me know,” I whisper.

Maela scans my face as though she senses the shift in my reaction, but in the end she doesn’t care. “I should be going. I have plenty of things to do.”

As soon as Maela exits the room, Pryana lets out a low whistle. “I’m sure there are plenty of young Spinsters to terrify.”

“I wondered when she was going to show her face. I was always a favorite of hers,” I add. Pryana and I share a laugh.

Amie lets out a nervous giggle. She hasn’t spoken since Maela’s impromptu entrance, and I can’t say I blame her.

“Maela can be very intimidating,” I say to Amie, hoping to put her back at ease. “It’s her most winning personality trait.”

“I would hate to see her other characteristics, then.” Amie twists a piece of lace around her fingers.

“Yes, you would,” Pryana agrees.

“What other rumors are flying around the Coventry?” I ask. It’s hard to find the courage to bring this up, because I don’t trust Pryana. However, she’s *out there*, and I know she hears all the gossip.

“Nothing new. Spinsters sneaking around with valets. Ministers engaging in dirty politics,” she answers, without giving me any concrete examples.

“I want to know the rumors about Cormac.” I’m taking a chance admitting this is what I want to know. Neither Amie nor Pryana has any loyalty to me. As it is, they might only be around to report back to Cormac. But my situation can’t get any worse. I don’t expect to get a straight answer from Pryana, but even if she is spying for him I have nothing to lose.

“They say he’s going mad.” Pryana’s answer sucks the air from my lungs.

I’d thought the same thing. But how widespread were the rumors? There were always plenty of rumors at the Coventry. Usually they were tangled with a string of truth.

“He’s losing his mind because the Whorl is coming,” the seamstress says in a whisper. My eyes flash to Pryana’s and she nods. I’m uncertain how to respond. How did a seamstress at the Coventry hear of the Whorl?

“Everyone is jealous,” Amie says in a burst of annoyance.

“Jealous of what?” I ask.

“You,” she says. There’s a furious blush on her fair skin as she speaks. “They’re jealous that he’s marrying you and that’s why everyone is spreading lies about him.”

Cormac had thoroughly ingratiated himself with Amie in my absence. If anyone is going to tattle on me it’ll be her, I realize sadly.

Still, Amie might as well know the truth. I have enough lies to keep straight. It isn’t a secret that I don’t want to marry Cormac. “They’re welcome to him.”

It was the wrong to say with Pryana in the room and I immediately wish I could take it back.

“He wants you to be happy, Ad,” Amie says in a quiet voice. The room falls silent, and the fitting ends without any more words exchanged between us.

One of the seamstresses starts to hum an old melody my mother used to sing to me as a child. When I look at Amie, tears glisten in her eyes. She remembers it, I’m sure. But I’m not certain if she can place it; those little moments of our lives before may have been wiped from her mind. The damage Cormac did to her is severe and I’m not sure it can be undone. Valery overcame his tinkering, though perhaps only briefly. For all I know she could have turned on Dante and the Agenda the moment I left with Cormac. I doubt it, though. Alteration can change many things about a person but still not affect her true essence. There’s only one way to permanently alter someone’s personality and I knew from my interactions with our mother that Cormac hadn’t gone that far with my sister. Amie still has her soul.

There’s an awkward pause we should fill with a hug, but neither of us is ready for that. Instead we say goodbye.

Pryana stops at the door, shooing Amie along, and I brace myself.

“I’m not going to hit you,” she says.

“You’ve hit me before,” I remind her, my fingers rubbing my jaw to relieve the echo of pain the memory recalls.

“Things have changed around here, Adelice.” Each of Pryana’s words is heavy, laced with a meaning I don’t quite understand. “Keep your eyes open.”

After they leave, I walk from room to room, surveying the emptiness that’s more acute than ever.

And even more dangerous.

NINE

THE CREWS CLUSTER INTO THE STUDIO SPACE, setting up lighting equipment and cameras. The studio is bare and simple, but large enough to fit the dozen or so crew members who will film my profile for this evening's Stream broadcast. I tug at my short skirt, feeling too exposed already. I'm not eager to be filmed, but Cormac arranged this as a way to introduce me before we begin a publicity tour through Arras—a fact that makes me even less interested in performing for the cameras. I've been dressed in a pink wool suit with gold buttons on the lapels because Cormac says it's matronly.

Exactly how a sixteen-year-old wants to be described.

He wants me to look like a wife, not a teenage girl, but I'm not sure a wool suit will hide our massive age difference.

Maela is handling my preparation. As neither of us has killed the other yet, I'd say it's going well. But then she flies back into the studio, barking out orders and shoving past several cameramen.

"We're behind schedule already," she complains loudly. "Are none of you capable of working in a timely fashion?"

"We were waiting for you," I tell her. This isn't entirely true, but I can't imagine starting without her. She probably would have interrupted the broadcast to throw a hissy fit.

"The program is supposed to stream in five minutes," she says.

"Ma'am, we're ready to go live. If Miss Lewys is prepared to begin, we'll start right on time," a cameraman says. He glowers at her as he speaks, and Maela balks. I wonder if she's more upset that he dared to stand up to her or if she's angry that he called her ma'am.

"Adelice." She sweeps over to me and hovers. "You will simply be adjusting a rainstorm in the Southern Sector. As we discussed, another Spinster will oversee your work from the main studios."

Because I'm too dangerous to trust with a loom. I stare at the loom procured for my use. It feels like a million years since I've woven on one and its gears sing out to me, my fingers itching to touch it. I have held the

naked matter of the universe, but it was never as peaceful as the act of spinning the refined weave of Arras. There is a harmony to the precise patterns used to construct this world and working with them is as second nature to me as breathing.

“Do you understand?” Maela asks in a harsh voice, and I look up to find her staring down at me.

“I’m sorry,” I say. “I was thinking.”

“Try not to *think* during the program,” she says. “Cormac wants you to make an impression.”

Of course Cormac does. He’s betting on this charade to distract the citizens of Arras from the tension within the weave.

“You only want me to add some lightning?” I clarify. I long to touch the rain, but I’ve been told exactly what I’m expected to do.

“I want you to not screw this up,” she hisses in a low voice meant only for me.

“It’s a good thing I’m the one doing it, then,” I say.

A commotion interrupts our exchange, and the Stream reporters part to reveal Cormac standing in the doorway. I shouldn’t be surprised. He’s obsessed with choreographing every aspect of my return to Arras—and of our sham engagement. The sheer fact that he would ask Maela to direct this shows how little he trusts me not to mess things up.

“Prime Minister.” The respectful greeting is murmured by every man as Cormac passes through the room, heading straight to Maela and me. When he reaches us, he ignores Maela and leans down to plant a kiss on my forehead. He lingers long enough for the several cameramen who snap photos of the moment.

“I will answer questions at the beginning of the broadcast,” he announces.

More than a few of the men grimace. Undoubtedly this will affect their Stream schedules and carefully planned programming. But no one challenges him. No one would dare deny the prime minister a chance to speak to his people. No one who wanted to keep his job, or for that matter, his life. I think of the man who dared to ask about my parents once at a rebound station, how he was carried away to an unknown fate. Now I know he probably wound up on Earth, half the man he once was, forced to become a Remnant to fulfill the whims of the Guild.

“We go live in thirty seconds,” a man announces from behind the camera.

Cormac looks to his side, spotting Maela still hovering in range of the camera lens. He groans and shoves her out of the way. It’s inelegant and rude, and Maela’s cheeks blaze with fury, but her gaze is leveled directly at me. I make a mental note to remind Cormac not to put me under her direction for future events and programs.

“And we’re live,” the man says, pointing a finger at the young reporter selected to interview Cormac and me.

“We’re extraordinarily honored tonight to bring you an interview with Prime Minister Patton from the studios of the Western Coventry,” he says, introducing the topic of the program.

“I’m pleased I could make it here to officially introduce my citizens to the young woman who has captured my heart,” Cormac says. His stance is steady and everything from his gesticulations to his perfect smile prove how he weaseled his way to the top of the Guild.

“We’ve had the opportunity to meet Miss Lewys today,” the reporter continues in a smooth voice, “and I think it’s safe to assume she will capture the hearts of Arras, too.”

Not a single one of these men has talked to me. Not even the one who adjusts the microphone system for the audio recording. I might become Cormac’s wife, but that means nothing to them. I could be a prop for all they care.

“Prime Minister, I know everyone in Arras is dying to know the same thing. How did Miss Lewys capture your attention?”

If one of them uses the word *capture* again, I’m going to scream.

I was the one who was *captured*, and it definitely wasn’t romantic. But like everything in politics, a shiny veneer applied to the surface of the story is meant to divert the listener with its sparkle so they can’t see the ugliness beneath its surface.

“Miss Lewys came into service with the Western Coventry in a truly remarkable way.”

That’s an understatement.

“Her talent caught my eye almost immediately. She’s an exceptional Spinster, but I soon discovered she had other talents and characteristics as well.”

Imagine a woman having other talents.

“Can you elaborate?” the reporter asked.

I keep a smile on my face, even as I choke back the mirthless laugh bubbling to my lips. I’d love to hear what traits caught Cormac’s attention. Was it my penchant for talking back or my obvious distaste for the Guild and everything it stood for, including him?

“Well, she is quite beautiful,” Cormac says, exchanging a nod with the reporter.

Yes, that is definitely my most winning characteristic—to Cormac. I’m pretty sure he hates everything else about me. At least our marriage will be based on a foundation of mutual disgust.

“She is beautiful,” the reporter confirms out loud as though they are discussing a statue behind them.

“And she has a rare treat for you tonight,” Cormac says. “We usually don’t show real-time weaving on Stream programming, but this evening Adelice will be weaving a rainstorm throughout the Southern Sector. If you’re in the area, you’ve probably been anticipating these showers all day. If not, you haven’t checked your weather programming.”

Cormac gives a stern look to the cameras and then relaxes into a grin. “I’m only kidding, of course.”

I know better than this. Cormac is incapable of jokes. Everything is a thinly veiled threat with him and this one is very clear. He wants to make sure the citizens of Arras have their priorities straight. He needs everyone to have their eyes on me.

“Adelice.” Cormac’s arm opens wide as though he’s presenting me. Somehow I feel more like a sacrifice than entertainment.

I smile widely and murmur a soft hello. I’ve been warned not to speak. This program isn’t about hearing me speak. It’s about giving Arras a face, one they’ve seen before if they’ve been allowed to remember it, while further glamorizing Spinsters. Now young girls can dream of beautiful clothing, luxurious lifestyles, *and* the possibility that they, too, could marry the most powerful man in the world one day.

On cue, the loom whirs to life and the Southern Sector’s weave glides silkily onto it. Most of Arras won’t be able to see the strands of life on the loom, but I’m told the producers of the program have illustrations that will be overlaid to show what I’m doing. But none of that matters now

that there is a woven piece on my loom. The storm is set to occur over the entire sector. Most likely as a demonstration of how much power the Spinsters can exert over an entire population at one time. My zoom function isn't enabled since my work is merely cosmetic. I can add some lightning and not much else. But when I touch the weave with my bare fingertips the rain shivers into them, cool and wet. I let my fingers linger in the lush tapestry, savoring the smooth, damp texture of the strands.

Reaching down to the tray at the edge of the loom, I pluck a single strand of lightning from the few dozen threads I've been given for this program. It tingles through my hands, sparking with electricity as I delicately wiggle it into a cloud hovering somewhere near the center of the sector. I imagine a bolt of light splintering the sky, followed by a *crack* booming over the homes of those watching the Stream from their living rooms. Before I can think, I add another, farther away, my fingers moving deftly.

I don't want to leave the loom. I want to go down to the studios and weave food rations. I want to lose myself in the precisely timed rain showers and snowstorms. I want to escape to a life of anonymity.

I could fold into this reality and forget everything. That's how addicting, how singular this experience feels. It consumes me. It motivates. For a moment I would do anything to knit my fingers into the slate-gray rain strands every day.

And as that desire pours through my blood, spreading like poison, my fingers ache for something new: destruction. My hands twitch toward the strands on the loom. Cormac wants a demonstration of my abilities, but shouldn't Arras see what I can also do? What all the girls trapped here can do? I suck in a breath and force myself to see the delicate weave in front of me. It teems with life, sparkling as it intersects with every piece around it.

I am not death. I am life.

"What an amazing demonstration," the reporter says, intruding on the euphoria of my work. The loom clicks off and the piece of tapestry fades away.

I miss it immediately. My center aches, hollow but for the longing to become part of something greater.

This is why the Spinsters do their work. This is why they don't abandon their duties. Because in the glorious moment when you can touch the fabric of the universe, you are one with it. You become it as you create it.

And this is why what the girls in the Eastern Sector did is spectacular to me. They walked away. And even now, with what I know, part of me wants to beg Cormac to bring the loom back for a few more moments.

I turn on my stool, crossing my legs in a prim posture for the camera, and smile again. But I wonder if the women watching at home spy the ghost of emptiness in my eyes.

"As you can see, Miss Lewys is a great asset to our looms and our world, and her role will continue to grow after she becomes my wife," Cormac says.

"Will she be working outside the looms?" the reporter asks. There's some hesitation to the question, but I'm not sure if it's because he doesn't want to ask or if it's because Cormac's insinuation is stunning, even to me.

"Not only will she be working outside the looms, she'll be working outside the home. It is our dream to move this world forward to more power and prestige. Each year Arras has advanced technologically, but it's time our greatest powers joined together in a new path. As you know, Spinsters are not allowed to marry. In many ways, Miss Lewys and I are embarking on a new world together, not merely a new marriage."

"And what is your hope for this new … world?" The reporter stumbles over the question.

I don't listen to Cormac's answer because I know it's lies. He's feeding the progressive dissenters what they want to hear:

Look, I'll give a woman some power on the Stream. We're moving forward, so stop worrying your pretty heads about the fate of the future generations.

But anyone with half a brain would notice I'm not allowed to speak. They would see my pristine costume, specifically chosen to look demure and womanly on the camera, and know I have no more power than they do. Cormac's plan is to show them that even a woman of great power is willing to lay it aside and become a wife. But I can hardly expect them to know that when even Cormac doesn't take my power seriously.

And yet, he placed me on this loom tonight. If I were a true rebel, I would never have done what he asked. I would have wreaked havoc over the entire Southern Sector, throwing it into an uprising. But even as I think this I spot the techprint on my wrist.

That’s not who I am. Unlike Cormac, I have no desire to abuse my skills to hurt the innocent. He knew that when he placed me here tonight. He’s calling my bluff, but he doesn’t know the cards I’ve hidden up my sleeve, especially not the access card I swiped from one of the guards. Cormac knows I’m a Tailor, though I don’t think he’s considered exactly how I could use that to my advantage.

But I have.

TEN

THE DREAM IS THE SAME. I am in a white room. When I look closely I see them. Frozen. Trapped. The faces of those I have loved and lost. My father. Enora. Loricel. They stare at me with dead eyes from translucent faces. Their mouths are twisted open, but struck dumb.

And still I go to each of them and ask them how to help. Nothing changes, so I return to the loom. On it are strands, but they are bloody. A bow is tied across the polished top of the loom, a single card dangling from it, reading: *Choose*.

The threads are dying, oozing away on the cold steel, but when I reach out to fix them the bands of the loom slice open my hands and fingers.

To save them I must bleed.

I reach forward and catch the sticky strands between my thumb and index finger and I see them.

Jost and Amie and Dante. They're dying.

Erik. His beautiful face contorts into a mask of anguish, and I begin to work without hesitation. Spurred by the ache in my chest that pulses with each cut of my fingers as I try to help him.

I twist and I tangle and I try to stop the blood ebbing from the strands, but as I do, I bleed more and more and more. A puddle forms at my feet and I know there's no way to save them all.

I begin to shake but then I hear a voice. "Adelice, wake up!"

The world blurs into focus and I open my eyes to find my sister standing over me with a frown on her face. I must have fallen asleep in a chair.

"You were dreaming," she says. "It sounded like a nightmare."

It was, but I don't tell her that. Instead I reach out and hug her close to me. For a second it's awkward, but she settles into my embrace. Her soft blond hair tickles my skin. We are right again.

"Are you okay?" She pulls away and looks at me with concern.

"I'm fine. I don't even remember the dream," I lie.

“I came to tell you that you were amazing on the Stream. I wish I could’ve been there, but Cormac forbade me.”

I frown at this. Since when does Cormac care what Amie does? He’s given her the run of the place since she arrived.

“I can leave if you’re tired,” she says, misinterpreting my frown. I shake my head. The dream sticks to me like the blood on the loom. I want Amie to stay because I need her. She strokes my hand, reminding me of our mother.

“What’s this?” Amie reaches out and runs a soft finger over my techprint.

“Credentials,” I say without thinking. I immediately wish I could take it back.

“From when you were with the revolutionaries?”

“Yes,” I say hesitantly. Amie wasn’t there to see Benn—the man we both knew as our father—print me on the night of my retrieval. She doesn’t remember that our parents were the ones who pushed us into those tunnels.

“Adelice, you’re lying to me,” she says in a low voice. “I know it. You keep lying to me. It’s like you forget that I’m your sister sometimes. I know you well enough to know when you’re telling me the truth.”

I sigh. This Amie isn’t the one I whispered to at night or opened Winter Solstice presents with. She’s different now. Hesitant where she was once vivacious. She doesn’t run to me like she did when we were girls at academy. We don’t share the same memories or experiences. Even though I want to trust her, I can’t keep the Guild from using her against me.

“Amie, they monitor everything we say to each other,” I tell her, choosing a logical reason to keep things from her.

“They’re listening to us?” she asks. She’s still very girlish sometimes in her trust of the Guild, so she doesn’t see the twisted mechanisms at work here.

“Yes. And I don’t think Cormac wants me to talk about my time on Earth,” I say, knowing I don’t want to tell her, either. “It’s not safe for you to know, and I don’t want to relive it.”

“Was it terrible?” she asks.

It’s a testament to how dependent she is that she doesn’t see I’m unhappy here.

“No it wasn’t, but it’s in the past.”

“And that’s it? I was out of your life for years, and you won’t share what happened to you? Or why you don’t look any older than you did the night they came for you?” Her lower lip trembles like when she was a girl and our mom told her no.

“I can’t,” I say. Her face sinks and she stands to leave. “I can’t tell you about *all* of it.”

Amie sits back down and waits with an eager expression.

“This isn’t a secret,” I say. “At least, not one that Cormac cares about.”

“Is it good?” She used to ask me that question at night when we swapped stories as girls.

“There’s a boy,” I say.

“Not Cormac?”

“No.” I laugh at her question, but she leans forward and grabs my hands.

“Tell me!” she demands.

“His name is Erik.”

Amie releases my hand and bites her lip in excitement. “I like that name.”

It’s exactly how I imagined it would be once I started courtship appointments. If I hadn’t come to the Coventry, Amie and I would have giggled over boys late into the night. Now this is as close as I’ll ever get.

“He has long blond hair. It’s a little bit wavy. And bright blue eyes the color of the Endless Sea.”

“He sounds cute,” she says, squeezing my hand.

“He is,” I say. “You saw him on the island.”

The words escape my mouth before I think them through. I shouldn’t bring up that night. Not now while our relationship is as fragile as glass.

“I don’t remember much about that night.” She’s lying and I know it, because despite all that’s changed about Amie, I recognize how she tugs at the one strand perpetually loose from her pinned-up hair. The same strand that wiggled free of her pigtails and ponytails and braids in our

childhood. She would curl it around her delicate fingers, twisting at it, when she got nervous.

“Do you love him?” she asks me.

“I do.” The words sit like a lump in my throat. “It doesn’t matter, though.”

The excitement fades from Amie’s face. “What about Cormac? Do you love him?”

There are things I’m willing to lie to Amie about, but this isn’t one of them. “I don’t. But my arrangement with Cormac was never about love, Ames. It’s about what’s best for Arras.”

“Even if you aren’t happy?” Her eyes are wide and earnest as she asks.

I wish it were that simple. I wish I could tell Amie that love and happiness win in the end, but that would only be another lie. “Arras is more important.”

“And that scar on your wrist? What does it mean?” she asks one more time.

I recall the words my father said to me the night I was taken: *Remember who you are*. I try to remember who I am, but I’ve discovered too many things about myself since that night. I’m not even sure I’m the same person anymore. I’ve evolved in many ways from who I was in that cellar.

“Decide who you are,” I say to her. “That’s what it means now.”

“Who are you?” she asks in a soft voice.

“I’m still deciding,” I admit. My eyes search my sister’s face and I’m amazed—despite the lost time, all I see is young Amie, as though she’s always been this age to me. “Who are you?”

“I want to be a Spinster,” she admits. Her eyes flash briefly at me but then she looks away.

Her confession is bitter as I swallow it, but I’ll never win her back by belittling her dreams. “And why can’t you be?”

“Cormac has let me try to use the looms already,” Amie admits, making my chest constrict. She shouldn’t be on the looms yet. She isn’t even sixteen years old.

“And?” I ask.

“I keep trying to see it,” she says in a sad voice, “but I can’t. And he’s so disappointed. He’s had me examined by doctors and everything.”

I know Cormac has had Amie’s memory altered, but this sends a chill shivering down my neck. I wouldn’t put it past him to try to alter her to have my skills. It’s a terrifying possibility given how much control he already exerts over her. Perhaps this is why he hasn’t pushed for me to be altered yet. He already has a test subject.

“I’ve been going down to a private studio,” she continues. “Cormac gave me permission, but I had to promise I would inform him if I saw anything.”

“Let me help you,” I suggest. “Cormac can’t see the weave himself, so he isn’t a good person to advise you.” I hate using her like this, but I need to get on a loom. I’m curious about what Cormac has shown her of the looms.

“Would you?” For a moment, Amie is the adoring sister looking up to me for wisdom, and I almost break.

Instead I push back against my guilt and tack a smile onto my lips. “Of course.”

ELEVEN

"HERE IT IS." AMIE RUNS HER HAND over one of the new security panels and the door creaks open. She pushes her way into the stone room as the lights automatically turn on, flooding the small studio. There's an empty loom directly in front of us, but I force myself not to run toward it. Amie enters her access code and the loom whirs to life. I could see so much with the loom, not to mention change those things, but I have to tread carefully with my sister.

I look at Amie, whose eyes bore into the empty work space on the loom.

"There's nothing on it," I tell her in a soft voice.

"Oh!" She's embarrassed but she manages a giggle.

I reach over and set the loom to pull up her most recent coordinates. Unfortunately, the last place she looked was an ordinary metro in the Western Sector. I can make out the entire metro—neighborhoods, the metro center, parks, academies. Try as I might I can't get it to pull anything else up, except for security warnings. I shouldn't be surprised that the looms are so carefully controlled and monitored now. I'd hoped to find a hole in Cormac's tight-knit security system, thinking he might have a blind spot when it comes to Amie. I revert to the original coordinates and sit back so Amie can look at the loom.

"Do you see anything?" I ask her.

She shakes her head. I zoom in to take a closer look at the outlying neighborhoods and ask again.

This time her lip trembles as she says no.

"It's okay if you can't do this," I say, putting a hand over hers. *It's more than okay*, I add silently.

"It is not! What use will I be to anyone?" she says.

"I thought you wanted to design dresses."

"I do! But Cormac will be disappointed in me. He has faith in me and I'm going to prove him wrong." Amie wipes at the tears dribbling down her cheek and turns wide, tearstained eyes on me, looking for comfort.

“I will take care of Cormac,” I say. “Let’s try one more time.”

I zoom in as close as I can to the weave, allowing the machine to default to a surveillance feed. We are looking at someone’s living room. Amie sucks in a breath and I’m certain she can see this, but when I turn there are tears glistening in her eyes.

“Nothing,” she whispers.

I drop my arm over her shoulder and hug her close to me, shushing her as she sobs against my shoulder. How can I ever tell her this is something she doesn’t want? Especially when it’s the last bit of the old Amie left after Cormac’s alterations?

So I let her cry and no part of me rejoices that she can’t see the weave or work the looms. I always thought it would be a relief to know my sister couldn’t be a Spinster, but my fears have only been replaced by her pain.

“I have an idea,” I say. “Let’s sneak into the kitchen and find some chocolate.”

Her eyes meet mine and a smile creeps over my sister’s face as she nods. I pull her gently to her feet and we walk arm in arm down the hall. As we pass the studios, I notice what I missed before: heavy bolts and security panels—even on the rationing and weather studios.

I’m not the only one under tight control.

No wonder they’re whispering that Cormac’s mad, that the Whorl is coming. A month of this would make anyone dream of change. No one stops us as we duck into the kitchen. A few maids bustle past and a young girl stops to point us in the direction of the sweets.

“Mom would never let us have chocolate this late at night,” I whisper to Amie conspiratorially. She giggles and I join her, choosing to ignore the dull ache in my chest at the thought of our mother.

I open the cupboard to discover a stack of chocolate bars, bonbons, and truffles. More chocolate than the entire sugar ration allotted in our childhood. I whip around to show off my discovery but Amie’s back is turned.

“Ta-da!” I call out. But she doesn’t turn toward me. Taking a step closer to her, I place a hand on her shoulder, urging her to look at me. Instead she steps to the side, revealing a large white cake with lacy lines of frosting that dip and weave delicately across its surface.

I can almost feel the too-sweet sting of the icing in the back of my throat.

“Why does this cake make my heart feel like it’s going to explode?” Amie asks in a small voice.

I can barely tear my eyes from it to look at her, but when I do the pain is written across her face. They’ve taken the memory but not the pain.

“There was a cake the night I was retrieved,” I remind her.

“I can’t remember,” she says. “Why can’t I remember?”

“What?”

“Mom. Dad. They’re here.” She taps her forehead. “But they’re not.”

I have a choice. I can tell her the truth about Cormac and alteration. I can tell her he has stripped her of most of her childhood and adjusted her life to leave out the horrific events of that night. Or I can continue to lie to her.

“Because you miss them,” I tell her, and in a way it’s the truth.

“What happened to them?” This time her question is demanding. I know Cormac fed her a story about them. Given that she’s been altered on more than one occasion, he’s probably told her several stories about her life. But I don’t know what she remembers or how she remembers it. I can’t anticipate how she’ll react to the information she desperately wants.

Telling Amie the truth serves no purpose. It might turn her against Cormac, but in the end, if I can’t find a way to save Mom, then she’ll also have to live with the knowledge of what’s been done to our mother. Amie’s innocence has already been twisted enough by Cormac. I must carry the burden alone. “They’re dead. They died when I tried to escape from the retrieval squad.”

Amie takes a step back as though I’ve hit her. “They died because you ran?”

In many ways this is what happened, but the guilt pressing on my chest tells me that even I can’t blame myself entirely. Amie remembers little about our parents, even less than I knew that night. But I can’t bring myself to tell her they had connections to the Agenda any more than I can tell her about Dante or that our mother is still alive. There’s so much more to the story that it wouldn’t help if she could remember it. It doesn’t matter, though, because Amie believes the little I’ve told her. And she

hates me for it. I can see it in her green eyes, the cool, hard emerald—she looks exactly like our mother when she's angry.

"How could you?" she asks.

"I didn't want this life." Even though I'm willing to protect her from the story of what happened to our parents, I'm not willing to pretend a Spinster is more than a false ideal. She needs to know there is a world so much larger than this.

"What's wrong with this life?" a soft voice asks behind us. Startled, Amie and I turn to find Pryana watching us.

"It's a lie," I tell her.

Pryana already knows this. She's smart enough to have always known.

Before Pryana can speak again, Amie chokes back a sob and rushes toward the door. I begin to stop her, but the weight of the truth holds me back. It's better this way.

"Every life is a lie we tell ourselves to help us sleep," Pryana says with a mirthless laugh.

"I never chose this lie."

Pryana takes a step closer to me and I can smell coconut on her skin. "I have news for you, Adelice. Every life is a choice. We don't get to pretend like we're forced into this world, this job anymore. You chose to come back. I chose to play along."

"You're right," I say, meeting her steady gaze. "We have choices—you and I and Cormac. But there's a good part of the population who are powerless to stand up to the Guild, and they don't have a choice. You know that."

"Of course I do. I think of nothing else," Pryana says.

My breath catches in my throat not because she's agreeing with me, but because of the implication of her words.

"I see you've been sneaking cake." Pryana says, changing the subject.

"I was trying to cheer Amie up."

"Why was she upset?" Pryana's voice pitches up an octave.

"She can't see the weave on the loom. I thought I'd help her, but I couldn't."

"It's tricky," Pryana says, her eyes glued on mine. "Alteration does funny things to abilities. But I don't understand why you didn't tell her

the truth about your retrieval."

"Why *would* I tell her the truth?" I reply as I pace the small space in front of the icebox.

"Because you hate Cormac," Pryana says. "He's the only one who gains anything by your keeping it from her."

So Pryana does know what Cormac did to my sister. "Amie gains something."

"And what's that?" Pryana asks.

"Innocence."

"Her innocence was robbed from her long ago," Pryana says, and her tone reminds me that Cormac and the Guild have robbed it from us all.

"She doesn't know that, though," I say in a quiet voice. "I can't quite explain it. If I tell her why she can't remember and about what happened to our parents, she has to live with that."

"We all have to live with that," Pryana reminds me.

"Yeah, we do, but she's my kid sister. Someday she'll know. I won't be able to keep it from her forever. But right now she feels safe. She doesn't have nightmares. She doesn't blame herself."

"And you would rather she blame you?"

I take a deep breath, willing myself to broach a sensitive subject. "Wouldn't you do that for your sister?"

"I don't know," Pryana admits. Her voice shakes. "The Guild took her from me before I had the chance."

"You could have told Amie the truth. Why didn't you?"

Pryana hesitates as she twists her fingers together. "I'm not sure. It's not my place."

"Why are you being kind to Amie?"

"I don't have a sister to be nice to anymore," she says, opening the old wound we share. I'd lost my innocence about the nature of our world long before the day Maela ripped Pryana's sister and her classmates from their Cypress academy.

"Blame Maela," I say.

"I do blame Maela," she says, practically spitting the words at me. "Did it seem like we were best friends back there?"

I give her a grudging no. It sounds like whatever passed between them in my absence was as bad as what I'd endured under Maela. It also feels

like Pryana still resents me.

“It’s Cormac,” Pryana says at last. “Maela hates anyone who catches Cormac’s attention.”

“And you were engaged to him,” I say.

“Briefly.” She shrugs. “I’m not exactly sorry to be rid of him. It was only a way out of here.”

“You didn’t want to be Creweler?” I ask, not hiding my surprise.

“I thought I did, but …” Pryana trails off. Her dark eyes meet mine. She doesn’t need to finish the thought. We both know the burdens of being Creweler.

“All of this over a scumbag like Cormac Patton,” I say.

“I was surprised you didn’t know.”

“I hadn’t seen Maela for a long time. I thought she was mad about Erik.”

“Don’t get me wrong. She still hates you more than me, and Erik has a lot to do with that,” Pryana says.

“How would she know about what happened between Erik and me?”

“She saw you kissing him in the garden,” Pryana reminds me.

“I didn’t mean that. Lots has happened since that night …” My thoughts trail away to memories of dancing in a moonlit courtyard and stolen kisses on the rocky shores of Alcatraz. I’m lost thinking of him, and I don’t realize I’ve said too much.

Pryana takes a step back and studies me, then laughs. “You’re in love with him.”

“I …” But I don’t know what to say, because if I lie, she’ll know. I try to fight off the blush stealing over my face.

“The rumor was that you ran away for Jost.” Pryana looks impressed.

“It’s complicated.”

“It usually is when you’re in illicit relationships,” Pryana says, but she’s smiling all the way up to her eyes. “You do have good taste. His hair—he hasn’t cut it?”

I allow myself a small grin and shake my head. Even though the thought of them both, Erik and Jost, of not knowing what’s happening to them, whether they’re safe—it’s almost too much to bear.

“I’m not being nice to Amie for revenge,” Pryana says, circling back to the question that sparked the conversation. “I like Amie. She reminds

me of my sister."

"Pryana." I pause, unsure how to say this now. It's much too late for an apology. "I've made a lot of excuses for what happened that day, but I'm genuinely sorry about your sister."

"Me too, and … it's not your fault."

This morning I would never have thought she'd admit this to me.

"There are things that no one in Arras knows about," I say, feeling compelled to share something with her now. "Horrible things. If Amie knew—"

"Knew what?" Pryana presses me.

"Our mother isn't dead," I tell her. It's a relief to confess this to someone. No one on Earth really understood how difficult it was to find out what my mother had become. Even Dante forced himself to believe my mother was worth saving when he let her go, believing that a part of her was still in there. I wasn't so sure. "She's a—"

"Remnant?" Pryana guesses, and my mouth falls open. "I told you things have changed around here."

"You've always had the good gossip, but how in Arras do you know about Remnants?"

Pryana raises an eyebrow and then gestures that we should leave. As she turns to go she flips her silky curls over her left shoulder to reveal the nape of her neck and the faint hourglass mark printed there. "Does this answer your question?"

I lunge for her, grabbing hold of her arm and whispering furiously, "You're Agenda?"

Pryana's pace remains steady and controlled, not wavering in the slightest at my accusation. "Shhh! *Things have changed*."

We continue toward the tower and as the shock wears off, a smile sweeps over my face. "I have questions for you," I tell her. "There's a lot I need to know."

"Not right now," she says, parting ways with me at the elevator.

"When?" I clutch her arm, but the elevator doors begin to slide shut and I jump away as she mouths one word.

Soon.

TWELVE

WHEN PRYANA APPEARS IN MY DOORWAY THE following day, I remember what Albert told me—that people would follow me as the Whorl. This is my chance to see if that's true.

Pryana slides a thin bracelet over my wrist and yanks me into the hallway. "It's a mask," she explains. "It disrupts surveillance. Temporarily."

"For how long?" I ask.

"Thirty minutes. Where do you want to go?"

"The clinics," I say without hesitation. "And Cormac's suite."

"I can't guarantee we'll have time for both."

"The clinics then." I hate having to choose, but getting information on previous alterations, especially on what's been done with my mother's soul, has to come first. If things go wrong with Cormac, I might not get another chance to find it.

We move through the main tower and into the rest of the compound, passing the locked studios I saw last night. No one walks the halls. The Spinsters are on the looms. "They've fitted these walls with an artificial program."

"I know," I say. "There are no windows here at all."

"Not just that," Pryana says a trifle wistfully. "It's one big camera now. Rule number one about life at the Coventry: watch your step. Because they certainly are."

My eyes flick to the walls, half expecting to see eyes peeking through the plaster at me.

"But they can't see us because of this?" I ask her, holding up my bracelet.

"Nope. Present from the Agenda," she says, flashing me a grin.

"How did you get them?" I try to keep suspicion from seeping into my tone.

"Rule number two: the Agenda is everywhere."

How? It didn’t make sense. No one else had rebelled when I escaped. Then I think of the hidden information on Enora’s digifile. Erik helped her with it.

The seeds of rebellion were planted when we escaped, and they grew while we were gone. I realize that for the first time the accelerated timeline of Arras is working in the Agenda’s favor.

“What are we looking for?” Pryana asks me as we wait quietly by the doors that lead into the medical wing of the compound. Before I can answer she raises a finger to her lips. Two nurses exit, chatting, and Pryana catches the door with the toe of her shoe, swinging it back open for me.

“I want to know what they’ve done to Amie,” I lie, not ready to share all my plans with her. My alliance with Pryana is still too fragile for that.

“You already know that,” Pryana says, glancing over at me. “They altered her memory, wiped it out of her.”

“But I want to know exactly what they did … in case there are side effects,” I say, hoping to sound more convincing.

“And that’s all?” Pryana prompts. She’s not buying it.

“I want to try to reverse what they’ve done to her.”

Pryana’s eyes widen. “And how will you do that?”

“I know some talented Tailors.” I don’t mention my own ability. The less Pryana knows about my plans, the safer we’ll be if she’s caught.

“We should look at the files first,” Pryana says. “I know where they are.”

As soon as we enter I remember everything, right down to the antiseptic scent that burns my nostrils. We pass the cold steel examination table, but when I look above it, I can’t see the helmet of gears and tubes that mapped my brain for the Guild. How necessary are measurements and maps to alter someone?

Pryana has already hacked the main companel by the time I peel my attention from the ghostly room.

“Amie Lewys.” Pryana moves over so that I can look through the files.

I skim the reports looking for anything that will indicate how much damage they’ve done to Amie until my gaze catches on the words

experiment terminated. A long sigh escapes my mouth. I hadn't even realized I was holding my breath.

"They're not trying to alter Amie anymore." I motion to the companel screen.

Pryana reads it over my shoulder, but instead of looking relieved, her eyebrows knit together.

"What is it?" I ask, even though I dread the answer.

"You're right about Amie, but what does this mean?" Her index finger trails along the screen and I lean in to see:

It is recommended the Cypress Project experiments be expanded to candidates regardless of age or gender.

Our eyes meet and I know we're both thinking the same thing. Whatever this means, it's nothing good.

"Do you know what the Cypress Project is?" I ask her.

"No, but I don't like the sound of it."

Smart girl, I think, considering whether I should tell her and whether the Guild might have a violent response to a Spinster knowing about the Cypress Project. If the Agenda starts sharing info about it, Cormac will know it started with me. "Spinsters aren't natural. The Guild created us through genetic experiments."

"But if they did that …" Her voice fades away as she bites her lip. "Why girls?"

"Control," I say in a flat voice. "Any of the boys who showed the ability were erased from existence."

"Tailors?" Pryana guesses.

I nod, impressed with how much she's learned from the Agenda in Arras. Then again, even my parents had known this. They had merely chosen not to share the information with me. I ignore the tremble that races up my back at the thought of my parents and the secrets they kept from me. It hardly even bothers me anymore.

"But I don't know what they mean by expanding the experiments," I say as I push away from the desk and stare at the clinic's white walls. They glare back at me like a blank canvas waiting for me to make my move. The longer I look at them, the more questions tumble through my brain until one latches on and then breaks past my lips. "Do you think it's strange that they keep this information here?"

Pryana shrugs as she scrolls through the files on the companel. “They’ve probably done some of the experiments here.”

I recall the metal helmet and the blinding light, followed by a series of questions meant to map how my mind worked. I’d been brought here for that. If I hadn’t escaped when I did, I would have wound up on one of those slabs while Tailors altered my memory to make me more docile. This is where they would have taken Loricel on the night of my escape.

“Have you been back here?” I ask her.

“Yes.” She turns away from the companel and stares me down. “The night you escaped. When they tried to alter me. Cormac wanted to splice me with Loricel’s genetics so I could take over as Creweler. Any more tests for me?”

I don’t even blink. Pryana must know how suspicious her change of heart seems. “One.”

“What’s stopping you? I’m dying to know how I can prove myself to you.” There’s hurt in her words.

“Why didn’t he wipe you? You knew too much to be trusted. Why didn’t Cormac alter your memories?”

Pryana snorts, shaking her head. “He did. At least he thinks he did. There’s one thing you should know about the Coventry, Adelice. This place is teeming with Agenda.”

“And the Agenda saved you?”

“A Tailor did,” she says. “You have no reason to believe me, but who else can you trust?”

Albert’s words echo in my mind. *Know their hearts*. I’m not sure I could ever know Pryana’s heart.

But Amie does. “If Amie trusts you, then I do, too.”

Pryana doesn’t seem terribly moved by my admission. Instead she focuses on the companel. “We don’t have much time. You need to tell me what you’re actually looking for.”

“I told you—”

“Don’t try to sell me that line about finding out what happened to Amie. We both know what happened to her. You need something else from here, and I’m dying to find out what it is.” Her dark eyes sparkle as her mouth curves into an arrogant grin.

The problem with Pryana is that in too many ways we're alike. It's hard to fool someone who thinks the same way you do. That doesn't mean I want her to know I'm here to find information about putting the pieces of my mother back together. She would say it's endangering the Agenda.

"A girl's gotta have her secrets," I say with a shrug.

"She also has to have her allies."

Her choice of words stops me. Enora told me the same thing, and so did Albert—two people much wiser than myself.

"My mother's soul strand is here somewhere," I confess. "If I can find it."

A shadow crosses over her eyes. "I know where the strands are. When I found out about Remnants, I went looking for information on Ursula."

She's never spoken this name to me before, but I instantly know who she is from the twist of pain in her voice.

"Your sister," I say. "Did you find anything?"

"There was nothing left to find. Maela shredded her academy. Nothing was salvageable."

I consider wrapping my arm around her, but guilt weighs me down, preventing me from lifting a finger.

Pryana draws a long, steadying breath. "Finding your mother's soul strand is a noble goal. I can help with that. But what's in Cormac's suite?"

"That's more complicated. Let me show you." I slide my fingers over the companel's screen but before I can pull up any files on altering someone's appearance, the light overhead pulses red and a calm female voice calls, "Unauthorized access" repeatedly.

"How long was that mask supposed to work?" I ask Pryana as we scramble to our feet.

"Thirty minutes," she says before tacking on, "theoretically."

"You might have mentioned the 'theoretically' before."

The screech of boots echoes on the linoleum in the hallway. Our only chance is that they don't know which room has been breached. Hopefully the mask can at least get this detail right.

"This way!" Pryana calls, shoving me into the small observation room attached to the office. My foot catches on the metal examination table

and I plunge forward, knocking over a nearby cart. Pryana catches me and forces me back on my feet, dragging me along behind her before I can even recover from my stumble. At the door we pause, peeking out to check the hallway, which is, miraculously, empty. I hesitate for a moment, but Pryana rushes toward the door that leads back into the main area of the compound and I'm left with no choice but to join her.

As we clear each set of swinging doors, the muffled shouts following us grow closer until Pryana grabs my arms and pulls me through the doors to the dining room. "In here."

As soon as we enter she pushes me toward an empty seat and takes the one next to me. The dining hall has changed. The large mahogany table that occupied the space when I first came to the Coventry is no longer there. Instead there are rows of individual tables. At each one a Spinster eats alone. As in the lower studios, every girl is confined to her own space, which keeps them from speaking to one another.

A few heads turn toward us and I smile brightly. The other girls turn back to their meals without returning the gesture. Plain chicken and a chunk of bread are placed before me. In the past extravagant feasts were presented at mealtime: curries and pastries and soups. This is utilitarian, nourishment and nothing more.

Pryana catches my eye and motions to the food. Picking up my fork, I try to eat even as my pulse races. As I chew on the dry meat, I study the other Spinsters. Their dresses are as plain as the food. A few have pinned up their hair, but hardly any wear cosmetics. Pryana and I look like peacocks in comparison, which only unnerves me more.

It's obvious we don't belong here right now.

Turning my attention to my plate, I force myself to eat. To blend in.

The door opens behind us and a group enters noisily, causing every girl in the room to sit up and look around. I catch my breath and force myself to do the same.

A handful of guards linger in the doorway and my stomach drops as Maela pushes past them. She scans the room, her eyes landing on me.

"Ladies," she calls out. "There has been a security breach. Please line up against the wall."

No one breathes a word. There's not even a sideways glance as each girl does exactly as she's told, myself included. Pryana squeezes in next

to me, but I don't dare look at her as Maela paces down the line, studying us. She doesn't stop in front of me, even though she must know who breached security. Maela is playing with us.

"One of you entered a secure area without permission," she says. "Who was it?"

I want to step forward, but I hold myself back. Cormac isn't here to save me from Maela's wrath.

Maela wags a finger at the group. "Come now. If you don't confess, I'll be forced to deem everyone here guilty. I'd hate to send all of you to the clinics."

Enough people have been wiped thanks to me. I shift my feet but Pryana holds me back.

"It was me."

I lurch forward in surprise to look at the girl who spoke. There's not a spot of color on her dark skin and her full cheeks make her look even younger than Amie. A few girls around her cast confused looks, but no one says anything.

"Gillian?" Maela raises an eyebrow as she plants her hands on her hips. "You broke into the clinics?"

Gillian nods, her gaze fixed on Maela. "I thought I could escape."

I take a small step forward, knowing I can't let this girl lie to save me. I don't know why she's doing it. But I do know the punishment for girls who try to escape. But as I move out of the line, Pryana's nails dig into my arm and drag me back.

"Very well." Maela nods to the guards. They don't shackle the girl. Instead she falls into step behind them, as though she knows exactly what's expected of her. A shiver races down my neck.

Maela waves off the rest of the group. "You may finish your meals."

As she turns to leave, her eyes meet mine. The tilt of her head would be imperceptible to anyone else. No one here knows Maela like I do. The message is clear: it's my move.

When the dinner shift ends, Pryana and I race back to my quarters and we're barely through the door before I drag her into the bathroom.

"Nice trick," she says as I turn on the faucets to drown out our conversation.

"I learned how to survive around here. It seems you have, too."

She shrugs. “We do what we have to do.”

“Including letting an innocent girl confess to treason?” I fight to keep my voice lower than the running water, even as blood pounds in my ears.

“I didn’t see you step forward.”

“I tried to! I want answers!” I demand, losing control over the volume of my voice.

Pryana’s jaw clenches and her coffee-colored eyes flash to mine. She looks away and shakes her head. “Gillian sacrificed herself for the cause.”

“What cause?” I manage. “What cause does the Agenda have that requires suicide?”

Pryana’s eyes roll back. “Don’t play dumb, Adelice. You know what we’re fighting for. Gillian did what she had to do to protect the Whorl.”

“Get out,” I say in a low voice. “Get out and tell whoever else is playing rebel here this: I don’t need protecting.”

Pryana’s eyes narrow, although she doesn’t challenge me. When she leaves, I move to the sink. Placing my hands under the running water, I splash it on my face and watch it stream across my skin. I rinse my face and my neck and my hands until I’m as clear skinned and pure as the girl who stepped forward for me today. But no matter how hard I scrub, I’ll never wash her blood from my hands.

THIRTEEN

A KNOCK SOUNDS AT THE DOOR. No one except Pryana and Amie knocks when they come to visit, and I'm fairly certain they're both upset with me. People only come to deliver food or clean or check my companel and they never wait for me to let them in. But when I open the door, I know the person is here to see me.

"May I come in?" Maela asks.

I step aside and allow her into my living room. She flits into the space, picking up a vase from the mantel over the fireplace. I half expect her to try to shove it into her pocket. It's written on her face: these should have been hers. Her quarters. Her job.

Her Cormac.

But that doesn't explain why she's here now.

"Can I get you something?" I ask her. "A drink? A map back to your room?"

"It's lovely to see you, too," she says. Maela doesn't take the hint. Instead she drops into a recliner, crossing her legs like she's getting comfortable.

I give up hope and sit down across from her. "I thought you might visit sooner."

"Cormac has you under lock and key. I wasn't allowed," she explains.

"You've never let that stand in the way before."

Maela sees rules as optional. She showed her flexibility with them more than once during my training—ripping an entire academy, torturing me with razor-sharp thread. It's not like her to do as she's told.

"But when I saw you in the dining room earlier, I assumed it was permissible for me to call on you."

"An interesting meal." I meet her eyes directly. "I don't recall interrogation being part of the courses before."

"Times are different at the Coventry, Adelice."

"They're different in all of Arras," I correct her.

“You’ve proven to be quite the catalyst.” She peers at me, waiting for my reaction. I keep my face blank, despite her accusation. She’s not the first to mistakenly blame me for the unrest in Arras.

“I think there’s a lot more going on here than anything I’ve caused,” I say.

“And yet, here you are. In the penthouse of the high tower. Ring on your finger,” she says.

I twist my engagement ring around, hiding the diamond in my clenched fist. Most days I forget I’m wearing it. Since Cormac comes only once a week, I rarely have to face my impending marriage.

“Why are you here?” I ask. “Or do you just miss torturing me?”

“I have missed your flair for the dramatic.”

“My flair? That’s sort of the pot calling the kettle black,” I say.

“Don’t worry, I’m not looking to be friends with you, Adelice,” Maela says.

“That’s a relief. I’m not taking applications.”

“And yet you let someone like Pryana into your quarters without a second thought.”

“Pryana is a friend.” It’s not exactly the truth, but it’s close.

“You should reconsider who you trust,” Maela warns me.

“That means a lot coming from someone I don’t trust.”

“I have nothing to gain by lying to you.” Maela leans forward as though she’s sharing an intimate bit of knowledge. “Cormac does. Pryana does. Even Erik does.”

“Erik isn’t here to lie to me,” I say, managing to get the words past the lump in my throat.

“Your trust has trapped you,” she says.

“What trapped you, Maela? What made you into such a frightened little bird?” I ask. Doesn’t she know she’s in a cage, not in control? Can’t she see the bars and locks and secrets that keep her here?

Maela flashes me a pert smile, something wild peeking from behind her eyes. But before she can answer me, a tutting noise distracts us both from the fight. Cormac stands in the doorway. I’m not happy he’s caught Maela torturing me. When Cormac has gotten involved in the past, it only led to more trouble from Maela. Now I know why, of course. But knowledge is far from power.

Maela avoided my question before, but the answer is written all over her face when she looks at Cormac. If I thought her capable of it, I might almost believe it was love smoldering in her eyes. Now I know why she never rose further. She built her own prison.

“I’m sorry to interrupt your visit,” he says. “I was told Adelice was alone.”

“Believe me, you aren’t interrupting anything,” I say. “Maela was leaving.”

Maela gives a hollow laugh as she stands. But when she brushes past Cormac, her fingers slide across his shoulder and she whispers something I can’t quite hear.

When she’s gone, I raise an eyebrow.

“You don’t want to know. Maela and I …” He doesn’t finish the thought, but I don’t need him to.

“I don’t care about either of your sordid pasts,” I assure him.

“You should. You are marrying me, after all.”

“To what do I owe this very unexpected pleasure?” I ask, changing the subject from his past conquests. “I haven’t ordered dinner yet, but I certainly could.”

“No, don’t bother. I’m here on official business. I won’t bother you for long.” But even as he says it, he shrugs off his jacket and throws it over a chair. Next he’ll pour a drink. Then he’ll avoid my questions. Our interactions here have become like clockwork.

“You aren’t bothering me,” I lie in a practiced tone that reeks of obedience and inferiority and all the things he craves from me.

Cormac reaches for his jacket and retrieves a thin box. “A gift for our upcoming engagement gala.”

“You shouldn’t have,” I say as I lift the lid to find a pair of shimmering black satin gloves.

“I’m told gloves are coming back into fashion, and my future wife should be the height of style.” He pulls at his bow tie, loosening it a little without taking it off.

“Thank you. They’re lovely.” I lay the box aside, knowing this isn’t why he came. He could have sent the gloves with my aesthetician. “Why are you here?”

“There are concerns for your safety within the Ministry,” Cormac says.

“You have me in total lockdown in a building reinforced by Arras-knows-what technology,” I remind him, pausing to allow him to contradict me. But when he doesn’t, I add, “I could go on.”

“That’s quite enough,” he says. “In order to keep public focus on the wedding, I will need you to travel. Therefore I’m bringing in someone to keep an eye on you … to protect you.”

“To watch me,” I correct him.

“Damn it, Adelice. Do you want to get killed?” He’s yelling at me, his fingers balling into fists, but all I can do is stare at him. Calmness sweeps over his face, and he continues in a slow voice. “Believe it or not, I don’t want you killed by some revolutionary.”

“You think the Agenda will kill me?” I ask, shaking my head at the ridiculous idea.

“The Agenda is unpredictable. I think they might try to take you away. Not only would that void our agreement, but it would also undo everything we’ve worked for.”

“You’re being overprotective,” I say, grinning at his choice of words. Even in private moments, Cormac is such a politician. But then he grabs my arm and shakes me so hard that my vision goes blurry.

“Don’t laugh at me,” he warns, cold fury creeping into his words.

I wrench myself away and stare at him, trying to focus. What was that about?

“I wasn’t laughing at you,” I say.

His eyes remain furious but after a few minutes he calms down and showers me with a litany of apologies.

“So I’ll have my own guard?” I ask.

“Yes.”

“Good. I’ve always wanted a guy in a suit to follow me.”

“Alixandra is hardly a guy,” he scoffs.

“Alixandra?” I repeat, narrowing my eyes.

“Did you think I’d leave you alone with a boy after what happened before?” he asks me.

He has a point. Not that I’m looking for romance at the moment. “I’m surprised you trust a woman with something as important as this.”

“Alixandra knows her place,” Cormac says. “Maybe you can learn a thing or two from her.”

“When do I meet her?” I ask.

“She’ll arrive tomorrow and then escort you to the gala at the end of the week. She will remain with you at all times.”

“Like when I go to the bathroom?” I ask.

“Of course.”

“Will she watch me sleep?”

“And floss your teeth, if I ask her to,” Cormac says, cutting off my questions. “You aren’t being cute, darling.”

“I’m not aiming for cute.”

“I won’t allow anyone to hurt you—not even yourself.”

“Then what about our deal?” I plead.

Cormac brushes off my objections and picks up his jacket. Before he leaves he says something I already know.

“Deals change.”

FOURTEEN

THE ENGAGEMENT GALA IS A TYPICAL GUILD affair right down to the flashing cameras and my choreographed entrance into the Northern Ministry on the purple carpet. Pressed linen tablecloths and structured flower arrangements are displayed carefully around a slate-gray dance floor. Even my gown had to be approved by Cormac in advance—a gray silk dress that skims my negligible curves and swishes in soft waves to my feet. It's beaded with silver crystals in triangular patterns that accentuate my waist and catch the dim light in the hall. Martinis are passed on trays. I grab one immediately but put it down after I taste it.

"Don't be wasteful," Cormac says, motioning to the abandoned drink. He presses his hand against the small of my back.

"Cormac!" A tall woman in a wine-colored gown dashes over and throws her arms around him, startling us both.

"Dawna, how nice to see you," he greets her smoothly as he pries himself out of her embrace. His eyes scan her vibrant dress, and then narrow. She must have broken his carefully articulated dress code.

"Your bride has such lovely taste," she says as she motions to the ballroom filled with Cormac-style objects, and I realize she must not know him very well. Anyone who did would see this is all Cormac's doing.

"She does indeed," he responds. He looks past Dawna, scoping out the crowd for someone more important to speak with.

"Actually," I say, plastering a smile on my face, "Cormac planned the entire event."

"But Cormac, you have to let the bride plan these things. It is her wedding after all." Dawna tut-tuts at the end for emphasis.

Me plan the big day? Not if either of us has anything to say about it.

"Would you like that, Adelice?" Cormac says, and he shoots me a look that says, *two can play this game*. He can fake the doting fiancé bit, too.

“I wouldn’t dare dream of questioning your wishes.” I push the words out of gritted teeth, never once letting my smile slip from my face.

“I see how she landed you,” Dawna says, smacking me a bit too hard on the shoulder. “Such a lucky girl.”

“Aren’t I, though?” I murmur, smoothing a wrinkle from my long satin glove.

“These are darling.” Dawna brushes her hand over my wrist. “Are gloves coming back in fashion?”

My eyes flicker to Cormac, but he’s busy searching the crowd. “So I’m told.”

“Then I must get myself a pair,” she says.

“Pardon us, I see Minister—” Cormac doesn’t even bother to finish his excuse before he pulls us from her clutches. As soon as we’re a safe distance away, he twists my wrist. “Stop telling everyone you don’t want to marry me.”

I pull against his grip but fail to extricate myself. “I didn’t say that to anyone, and we’ve only spoken to one person so far. Stop being dramatic, darling.”

“We need the four sectors focused on the wedding—”

“Three,” I remind him softly. “There are three sectors now.”

“Of course,” he snaps. He tugs at his bow tie, but I bat his hand away.

“Don’t undo that. Everyone will assume you’re drunk already and then they’ll think *you* don’t want to marry *me*.”

“It’s tricky, isn’t it?” Cormac asks.

“What?”

“Pretending you want to marry someone. Stressful even.”

Before we can break up at our engagement gala, a group of men approach.

“Shut up and smile,” he orders.

Thanks for the reminder. This is already turning out worse than I feared.

I lose track of who is who and who runs what, and eventually give up on keeping each new person straight. Enora quizzed me on this once, I realize with a pang, but so much has happened since then. And she’s not around to help me now. I turn my attention to the crowd instead. In the two years that I’ve been away from Arras, it looks like Cormac’s been

cleaning house. I spot Alixandra watching me out of the corner of my eye. I couldn't get away from Cormac now if I tried.

I consider going over to her. She's the only person I recognize here. Although, after nearly a week under her protection, I've discovered that Alixandra is not a talker. She dresses like a Spinster when we're together and the official story is she's my personal assistant. But everyone knows she's my security detail. She broods even in a ball gown—though I'm still not buying the story that Cormac is worried about my safety. She's not my bodyguard.

She's my chaperone.

Alixandra is petite with long blond hair and a button nose. It's not going to be hard for her to stay undercover, but I still can't imagine she'd actually be able to fight if it came to it. But looks can be deceiving. If Cormac trusts her, she has to be deadly. I know little else about her.

The afternoon we met her eyes swept over me, sizing me up with a cool disinterest. I had the distinct impression I'd failed whatever test she'd administered.

"I'm Adelice," I finally said, as she continued to watch me. I stuck my hand out, feeling it was proper.

Alixandra didn't shake my hand. She circled around me.

"So you escaped the Guild," she said in a cold voice.

"I'm not interested in discussing my history with you." If she wanted to dredge up the past, I didn't have to participate, but even so, my fingers traced my techprint for comfort.

"I'm not interested in your smart mouth," she said, her voice never rising above the same steady tone. "You ran off with two boys."

"Two brothers as a matter of fact," I said. I had no idea why she was insisting on talking about that.

"Yes, I know." Alixandra stopped in front of me. We were about the same height, but something fierce in her eyes made me shrink back. "I'm surprised Cormac is marrying you."

"Join the club," I said, biting my lip. Most people were nice to my face. But I knew most of Arras must disapprove of Cormac marrying someone as young as me. Alixandra was the first person to show it.

"I mean, he can't believe that you kept purity standards while you ran around down there, can he?"

“He can,” I retort, tilting my chin up defiantly, “because I did.”

“Is that true?” she asked.

“It is.”

“I’ve seen those boys. I’m surprised.” Nothing about the conversation was friendly. I wasn’t sure if she believed me about the purity standards, and I definitely wasn’t sure why she would even care.

“It’s important that you realize I’m not your friend, Adelice,” Alixandra told me. “My job is to keep you secure and to keep you out of trouble.”

“I’m not planning to get into any trouble,” I said. I meant it. Making things difficult at the Coventry or in Arras didn’t fit into my plans. I hadn’t come back to make trouble. I knew if I wanted to keep the people I loved safe, I needed to play along.

“I’m glad to hear that, but all the same, remember I’ll have my eyes on you,” she said.

Alixandra didn’t like me. That much was clear.

“So you’ll be with me at all times?”

“Yes, per Cormac’s instructions,” Alixandra said.

“And after we’re married?”

“I’ll do what he asks me to do. I wouldn’t count on him relaxing the security surrounding you, though, especially once children come along.”

I gagged a little, but managed to cover it with my hand. Children hadn’t been part of our discussions.

“You don’t look excited about having children,” Alixandra noted.

I wasn’t. “Things are happening very quickly. It’s a lot to take in.”

“Cormac will want an heir, of course, and then …” She let her words trail away and didn’t finish her thought.

I wanted her to continue, but I couldn’t stomach any more talk of my future with Cormac. I avoided conversation after that.

“Adelice!” Cormac’s voice calls me back to the present, and I blink at him. “Minister Swander asked you to dance with him.”

“Of course,” I murmur, trying to remember who Minister Swander is. The name sounds familiar, but to my surprise the man who steps forward is young and handsome. I recall the last gala I attended at the Coventry—when Erik reminded me that every official was married. Swander’s wife must be nearby. I take his hand, ready to get it over with.

Minister Swander leads me onto the dance floor, keeping a proper amount of space between us and dancing formally, which is to say, stiffly. For a moment I wish I was dancing with Erik, but I immediately put the thought out of my head. Then I notice that with each careful step, he is leading me farther across the dance floor, farther from Cormac.

“Cormac has finally landed himself a new Creweler,” he says in a light tone.

I study him closely. He’s exactly how I imagine Cormac would have looked at the same age. Too slick, too quick with a smile.

“I suppose he has,” I respond. “Pardon my saying so, but you seem a little young to be a minister.”

“You seem a little young to be a Creweler.”

“Touché.”

“I was born into Ministry service,” he explains to me. “My father was an official.”

“Was?” I ask.

A confused look passes over the minister’s face. “He died.”

“I’m sorry.”

“Don’t be.” He waves off my regrets with the ease of someone who never mourned the loss.

“You weren’t close?” I guess.

“No, we were,” the minister assures me, “but that’s life.”

But it’s not life, I think. Not for the Guild. Officials don’t just die and ministers don’t forget what happened.

“How did your father die?” I press.

“Old age, of course.”

I can see I’m not going to get far with him, so I change the subject.

“Is your wife here?” I ask.

“I’m not married,” he says.

I can’t help myself. “That’s unusual.”

“I suppose I was married, but my wife is gone.” He stumbles over the confession, blinking as if to clear his head.

Suddenly I know where I’ve heard his name. The old memory resurfaces and my stomach rolls over.

She had an accident.

Amie’s words. Before I can compose myself, he stops and drops his hands from me.

“The song has ended. I suppose I must return you to your fiancé.” He offers me his arm. His gaze stays unfocused, as though he’s searching for something in the distance as he leads me back to Cormac and thanks him for the dance.

“Of course,” Cormac says. “It looked like you were having a nice chat.” I can tell Cormac wants to know what the minister said to me. Of course he does.

“He was telling me how his father died,” I admit.

“He was?” Cormac asks. I can’t gauge his reaction.

“Actually, he was *about* to tell me,” I say, turning to Minister Swander expectantly.

“Excuse me, I see Brient,” he says, avoiding the question once more. “Thank you for the lovely dance.”

He hurries away, and I can’t help but notice that he dashes straight for the washroom.

“How did his father die?” I ask Cormac. “I thought the Guild had gotten around that inconvenience.”

“We can still die, Adelice,” Cormac mutters.

“You could have fooled me.”

“Death is a tricky thing. He wears many faces.”

I wonder what face death will wear when he visits Cormac. I wonder if death will look like me.

“And his wife?”

Cormac shrugs.

“There was an accident,” I say. “You made an example of her.”

I recall the reverent account Amie gave about her teacher, at our dining table. I remember the hushed fear in my parents’ voices. I remember everything about that night.

“You do love your stories,” Cormac says, taking my elbow and steering me out of earshot.

“The truth is much more interesting,” I say in a low voice.

“Truth takes time,” he warns me. “Someday, when you’ve lived a lifetime, you’ll understand that.”

“And how long will it take you to believe it?”

He flashes me a murderous look, and I duck back toward the crowd, my heart beating fast as my past and present collide.

*

The dinner is served in courses. The first is the onion soup I despise. I slurp it loudly, pretending to relish every drop. Cormac ignores me, chatting with the other guests at the table. I pick at my roasted pheasant and finally abandon it.

“When is the wedding?” the wife of one of the ministers asks me from across the table.

I blink at the question. We haven’t set a date, which is fine by me. It gives Cormac more time to milk this distraction and me more time to figure out what he’s hiding from me.

“I’m not sure,” I say in a syrupy voice. “Cormac is preoccupied with other issues at the moment. I wouldn’t dream of distracting him with my silly wedding plans.”

Cormac’s hand lands on my leg and squeezes it tightly. I’m being warned.

“But you must be excited.” The woman folds her hands under her chin, a dreamy look coming over her face.

“I am,” I lie. “I hope it’s soon.”

Cormac leans in toward me. “I wouldn’t dream of making you wait much longer.”

I force a smile onto my face, hoping it looks right. I don’t find his words reassuring.

He stands and raises his champagne flute, waiting for the other tables to quiet. A few people tap their own glasses with forks and soon all eyes are on him. The conversation in the room dies down, but I spot a few people whispering and even a handful of eye rolls.

“Friends,” he addresses them. “I’m honored that you chose to spend the evening with us.”

I’m guessing there wasn’t much of a choice when they got the invitation.

“My beautiful future bride and I are eager to start a new chapter in Arras. Joining the Guild and the Coventry in marriage is rather, shall we

say, unprecedented."

He waits for the few chuckles this elicits before he continues. "Our great nation is changing and even an old bachelor like me can see this. I've been married to my work for a long time. Adelice has shown me that our values and priorities must be realigned. The value of the family cannot be understated, and I look forward to finally contributing"—he winks—"to emphasizing the place of the family in Arras. With the help of my lovely future wife, of course."

I try to cover my face with my napkin. Perhaps it looks like I'm crying, because the woman sitting next to me pats my shoulder.

"So please join me in raising your glass to the beautiful and talented Adelice. The woman who captured my heart so fully I couldn't let her escape."

Truer words were never spoken. I lift my glass, but never get a chance to take a sip. A blast rips through the room, knocking me against the table. The crowd erupts in panic and I look to where Cormac stood seconds ago.

He's gone.

FIFTEEN

SMOKE UNFURLS ACROSS THE BALLROOM AS PEOPLE cough and scramble toward the exits. A woman is knocked down but no one helps her up, each person too concerned with his or her own mortality to notice. I push through the mass, trying to reach her, but the crowd jostles me farther away. I'm pulled out by Alixandra.

"What's happening?" I ask. I choke on the smoke burning my nostrils and my throat. It leaves the taste of ash on my tongue and my mouth is too dry to swallow against it.

Alixandra shushes me, peeking out the door and into the chaos.

"I can't see Cormac." From her it's a cold, hard fact: no emotion invested, no anger or concern. It's all a business transaction. She has secured one precious commodity and now must secure the next.

"We should look for him." I move to step out the door.

"No, my responsibility is to protect you."

"Fine," I say leaning back against the wall, "but at least tell me what I need protecting from."

"Revolutionaries, obviously. We haven't had any issues since Cormac dealt with the Eastern Sector, but this is an organized attack."

"Is it the Agenda?" I try to keep the hope out of my voice. Not only because I don't want Alixandra to hear it, but because I don't want to feel it myself.

"Up here? No way."

"Then there's a different revolution in Arras?" I say, playing dumb.

"I was told you were present at the severance of the Eastern Sector." Alixandra eyes me like I'm a small bug she doesn't know whether to ignore or squash.

"And I was told that was an isolated incident and that the quarantine would prevent it from spreading into the surviving sectors."

Alixandra snorts. "Don't believe everything they tell you."

"So there's revolution everywhere then?"

"Ask Cormac how many sectors there were when they created Arras."

“Wait! What?”

But Alixandra goes back to ignoring me. She hikes up her skirt to reveal a holster tightened around her thigh, and withdraws a compact gun. Tilting her head, she calls for transport.

“But we don’t have Cormac,” I remind her. I’m not exactly concerned about his safety, but a small part of me worries about the chaos that would follow if he’s assassinated.

“My priority is you. Cormac has his own security team. In fact, he probably already left,” she says.

“But—”

Alixandra raises a finger and takes another com. “Priority one. Access Alpha Two.”

As she rattles off the security clearance, she turns away from the door and I see my chance. Before she can stop me, I duck back into the smoky room. A few people have collapsed on the floor, but other than that the room is deserted. The lingering haze stings my eyes, but I move forward, looking for Cormac, unsure whether I want to find him among those on the floor.

The cock of a gun stops me in my tracks. I raise my hands dramatically. “You found me,” I say to Alixandra.

“Turn around,” a male voice commands, and icy fear races through me. The man is wearing a gas mask and I can’t see his face. I can see the gun extended to my forehead, though.

As soon as I face him, his hold on the gun slips. Before he can say anything, Alixandra cracks him on the head with her weapon.

“C’mon.” She grabs me by the arm. “Are you trying to get killed?”

“He was lowering his gun,” I tell her, trying to work through the confusion I feel.

“It’s good to know that a group of armed mercenaries won’t shoot an innocent girl,” she says, dragging me out a back exit.

“No, it was more than that. It was like he wanted something from me.”

“He probably did, and it probably wasn’t anything pleasant,” Alixandra says. Outside, our transport screeches up and two officers in tactical vests rush out to help us into the back of the van. Alixandra shoves me inside before I can protest.

“Our orders are to escort Miss Lewys directly to Minister Patton’s private residence,” one of the guards tells us.

“Look at that, Adelice,” Alixandra mutters with a grim smile, “you’re going home.”

*

Cormac’s house sits on a hill overlooking the Cypress metro. It’s a concoction of glass and steel beams that jut out in strange ways. As we pull closer, I can see him through the window, pacing. The interior is bare. The *click* of our footsteps on the slate-tiled floors echoes in the large empty foyer, and the scent of bleach clings to the air, no doubt a side effect of keeping the home’s surfaces so gleaming, pristine. There are no pictures or artwork. No sign that the man who lives here has led an extraordinary life. Perhaps Cormac knows the meaninglessness of objects in a world where anything can be conjured. Or maybe he simply has nothing to cling to—even after two hundred years.

The officers march me past three different security doors. As soon as they deliver Alixandra and me, they leave.

“I’m fine,” I tell him when he asks if I’m okay. “Don’t worry about me.”

“I knew Alixandra would get you out of there,” he says, almost apologizing.

“I went back, looking for you,” I accuse.

“Well, that was very stupid.”

“Don’t worry. I learned my lesson,” I say. “It won’t happen again.”

“And what were you doing letting her out of your sight?” He turns on Alixandra.

“She’s quick and she doesn’t listen,” she says.

I like to think this is the understatement of the year.

“What do you know about this attack?” he asks her.

“Security is sweeping the scene,” Alixandra informs him. “If revolutionaries managed to get in, I’d guess they have someone on the inside.”

“I’ll have to deactivate the personnel we used this evening.”

“Sir?” Alixandra visibly pales at his threat.

“Not you,” he roars. “I want you to check the reinforcements we installed there and double-check the Coventry—”

“I can assure you that the Coventry can’t be breached from the inside or the outside,” Alixandra interrupts him.

“Check again.” His tone is impatient.

Cormac gestures for me to take a seat and Alixandra leaves the room to make her calls. He hasn’t stopped pacing since I spotted him through the window. His bow tie hangs loose and he’s lost his jacket. It’s the most disheveled I’ve ever seen him. I have to admit he’s been through a lot this evening.

“We need to assume that was an assassination attempt,” Cormac tells me.

Yeah, I figured.

“But we don’t know their target,” he continues.

I stare at him. “I have a pretty good idea.”

“I’m not interested in jokes right now. This is serious,” he says.

“Pardon my delivery, then, but I *am* dead serious. You can’t possibly think they were after anyone but you.”

“They could have been after *you*,” Cormac says. “You’re a high-profile target now and your death would cause major upset among the population.”

I think back to the man in the gas mask. He was definitely lowering his gun. “They weren’t after me.”

“It doesn’t matter.”

“If I were you I’d stay focused on how they got into the ballroom.” There was security everywhere. Cormac can no longer trust his own men.

“Alixandra and I will deal with those issues,” Cormac says. “It’s time to take decisive action.”

“The last time you took decisive action it cost Arras an entire sector,” I seethe.

“This time my action will be about unity,” he says, “not destruction.”

I don’t like the sound of that.

“I’m moving our wedding up,” Cormac says.

“Okay. Why?” I ask. It’s honestly the last thing I expected to hear, and the last thing I think we should be worried about.

“To send a clear message to Arras that these are joyful times.”

“Oh, definitely,” I say in a flat voice. “Why not just alter everyone?”

“It’s not merely a message to our citizens.”

“It’s a warning to the terrorists, too?” I guess.

“Exactly. I want them to know they can’t scare me.”

And yet these are clearly the actions of a desperate man. Surely the revolutionaries will see that.

“So when?” I ask.

“I was thinking next week, once Alixandra has confirmed the new security measures are stable.”

“Next week?” I struggle to wrap my head around this. Marrying Cormac will give me access to his home, his office, his life. Everything I need and all that I hate.

“You will stay within the Coventry until security has prepared to transfer you here,” he informs me. “Say goodbye to Amie while you’re there.”

“She’ll be at the wedding, though?” My throat constricts on the question.

“Absolutely not,” he snarls.

“Why punish her? She has nothing to do with this.” My words are thick, coated in a mixture of fear and anger and disappointment.

“Someone tried to kill you tonight,” he reminds me. “I won’t put Amie in harm’s way. End of discussion.”

I’m frozen to the spot, trying to understand why Cormac Patton cares about what happens to my sister. I know there’s something missing, but I can’t quite add it up. “She’s not in danger.”

Cormac’s fist slams against his chair. “I will decide that. Amie will not be risked.”

“So you can use her against me?” I guess, glaring at him as my fingers twitch inside my gloves.

“Not everything is about you, Adelice.”

“What reason do you have to care about my sister?”

He presses his index finger to his temple. “You think I’m heartless, but perhaps you’ll finally understand me once we’re married. Thankfully, we’ll be married within the week.”

I gasp at this further change of plans. “I’m not ready.”

“It’s time to grow up, Adelice.”

“I don’t expect you to understand,” I say in a quiet voice, not to be argumentative, but because it’s the truth. I thought I would have more time. Time to forget Erik. Or at least time to find another way to stop Cormac.

“Why? Because of your *destiny*?” he mocks. “Because you’re the Whorl?”

“I didn’t ask to be.”

“You think because some madman gave you a nickname it makes you special?” he demands. He grabs me and shoves me against the wall. “I determine who is special in this world.”

“What you do is far worse than a simple determination.” I brace myself against the plaster behind me. I can no longer keep it from spilling out. “You twist, Cormac. You twist the truth, nature, and worst of all, people. Especially yourself.”

“And now the Whorl will stop me, right?”

I consider this. I want to stop him. I need to. “I’m not sure anything could stop you.”

Except one thing.

My fingers lash out and grab for his strands. If I can catch them correctly, I can control him.

The only thing left is to manipulate him. Once he’s under my command, I can even unwind him. The possibilities are endless. All it took was realizing that he would never redeem himself—that he doesn’t want to.

But my fingers catch on his shirt.

Instead of ripping through it and down into the very matter that composes him, my fingers catch, fire bursting through them. I fall back as the flames dance inside my skin. I try to pull off the satin gloves, but Cormac grabs my wrists, pinning them in his strong grip.

“Do you think I would be stupid enough to remain unprotected around you?” he asks.

“They’re gages?” I say, and Cormac nods. “So much for trust.”

“Don’t flatter yourself, Adelice. This is not a relationship based on trust. It never will be,” he says. “More gloves await you at the Coventry. You will always wear them in my presence until a more permanent arrangement can be reached.”

A tremble races through me at his threat. “And if I don’t?”

“I’m protected. Remember that,” he warns me.

“You have no idea what I’m capable of.”

“What is your plan? Are you going to kill me? Take my face? Alter my memory?” he asks with a laugh, stumbling back toward the mantel.

So he’s known all along that I planned to alter him. I showed my hand when I attacked Kincaid, and Cormac was smart enough to protect himself even after our arrangement. “You still want to continue this charade?”

“You cannot possibly understand how far I would go for Arras.” Squatting down, he reaches past the grate and places his hand in the fire, withdrawing a remnant of wood as I stare, unable to move.

He stands to face me, crushing the smoldering wood between his hands. It turns to ash, blackening his burned palms. He’s beyond anything mortal, like pain. He’s evolved past it.

Instead of staying pressed to the wall, I saunter toward him and jab a finger at his chest. “There will come a day, Cormac, when no amount of technology will save you, and not only will I be there, I’ll feel your life in my hands.”

“You have no idea who you’re dealing with,” Cormac growls, but he doesn’t touch me again. Instead, he calls for his valet to bring him renewal patches. Security arrives shortly after to escort me to the rebound station. Before I leave, Cormac looks up from his wounds and smiles at me.

“Good night, Adelice. I’ll see you in the morning.”

The farewell is almost sweet, so I nod, confusion churning inside me. As I climb the stairs, trailed by a guard, the emotion inside me shifts to fear.

If I was truly the Whorl, I could hold things together. Instead, everything is unraveling. Even Cormac.

SIXTEEN

AMIE MILLS ABOUT MY QUARTERS WHILE SERVANTS bustle in and out, packing my trunks in preparation for the wedding, which will take place in the Northern Sector. She does a good job of looking excited, but the joy doesn't reach her eyes. Immediately after I returned from the engagement gala, Cormac sent her a telebound with the news that she wouldn't be coming to the wedding, leaving me to deal with her disappointment for the past two days. His message explained she was too young to attend a political function.

For once, he's calling something as it is. Our engagement *is* politics, after all.

"You aren't missing anything," I tell her. "A bunch of snooty ministers and their wives, each vying to be the biggest suck-up."

"Oh, I know," she says, but her words are punctuated with sighs. "I can watch on the Stream. You'll be on the purple carpet. Cormac promised the whole event will be filmed."

Admiration colors her words and I cringe. I'm no longer the girl who watched the purple carpet with glee in my living room. Now I know about balancing on heels and fending off drunk ministers with grabby hands. But one look at Amie's face, and I suddenly wish I could enjoy it. I pretend to be giddy—if only to cheer her up for a moment.

"What if I trip?" I ask, dropping onto my bed and widening my eyes for effect.

"You should practice." Amie plucks a pair of heels from a loaded rack and tosses them next to me. "Show me how it's done."

I slip them onto my feet, left foot first. I watch for some sign that Amie has noticed this old ritual of our mother and grandmothers, but there's no recognition on her face.

"Gloves?" She holds up a pair of petite white gloves.

"They're back in fashion," I say in a tight voice.

"I'll have to get some," she says as she lays them back on my bed.

I bite my lip so hard I taste iron on my tongue. Cormac's orders were clear. As soon as I leave the walls of the Coventry, I am to wear them. There's been no more mention of the permanent solution that will forever cripple my abilities, and for now I can only hope the gloves will pacify him. Either way, after I leave here, I will never touch again. Not really. He'll rob me of my strongest sense—with a pair of gloves or an alteration. All I will have is the memory of the weave tingling across my fingertips and of the hot pressure of Erik's fingers threaded through mine.

"Will you return here?" she asks, drawing me back to this moment.

"Cormac expects me to live with him in the Northern Sector," I tell her as I blink back tears.

"Oh." Amie deflates a bit in front of me and I grab her hand.

"You can stay with us as soon as this wedding nonsense is over."

"Promise?"

"I do." I mean it. If I go through with this, maybe I can rebuild my family a little, but still when Pryana enters the room, I look to her, hopeful she's come to pass along a message from the Agenda. They must know of Cormac's plans, but she shakes her head slightly as though she can read my mind. No one is coming to help me.

"Pryana!" Amie jumps up and rushes to greet her. "Adelice says I can live with her and Cormac in the Northern Sector."

"Good for you." Pryana's words are forced and when our eyes meet, recrimination burns behind her irises, although she does her best to hide it. I'm taking another sister from her.

"Come with marital advice?" I ask in an attempt to keep the mood light. "Speak now or forever hold your peace."

"No, I came with a gift." Pryana hands me a small wrapped box. "Open it in private. I don't want to *embarrass* your sister."

Amie pretends to cover her ears, but I swat her hands away and fake a laugh.

"Thank you," I say to Pryana, who gives me a tight smile.

They stay until Amie's eyelids droop, and then Pryana forces her onto her feet. I wrap my arms around my sister, who's as tall as me, and try to find a way to say goodbye.

In the end the words were there all along. "I love you, Ames."

She nods through her tears, releasing me after a few minutes and stepping away, but her eyes stay locked on me as though I might vanish. She doesn't remember what happened the night of my retrieval, but the wounds are still there.

Pryana gives me a short, awkward hug. "Open the present somewhere safe."

I nod, wide-eyed as my pulse begins to race. I walk them to the door, torn between sadness and hope, and as soon as it locks behind them I retrieve the box. My fingers tremble as I carry it to the bathroom. I rip into it, discovering another box tucked inside the first—like a toy I had as a child. When I pull it out, the only thing inside is a crystal cube with a delicate, shimmering strand of silver frozen inside.

*

The next morning I find myself crammed into a tiny rebound lounge with a party of twenty security personnel and assistants. Despite the large number of people, no one speaks to me. My aesthetician for the trip is bubbly and bright, mindlessly chatting with the other girls who've come along to assist her. Alixandra watches from the corner of the room, aloof as usual. Not only from me, it turns out, but from everyone. The guards whisper and stay alert. Tension cuts through the room, needling everyone's nerves. It's only been a few days since the attack at the gala, making it feel as though there could be another attack at any time.

The Western Coventry's rebound station is prepped for our departure and there's not much waiting around. Half of the security team is going in advance, with the other half following behind. I've been briefed a dozen times on the schedule and on contingencies to the schedule and on contingencies to the contingencies.

I don't even pretend to care. I am going to marry Cormac. I will never use my gift again. These words echo through my empty mind, threatening to destroy what little I have left. All my energy is spent on staying sane.

We wait for the first set of rebounds to finish and I sit alone, hoping to catch bits of news from careless lips. This is what I've become. A wisp. A nothing. Forced to latch on to gossip—as if it will ever do any good.

“Can you imagine sending any other Spinster with this entourage?” a girl says in a lowered voice. She’s not quite whispering—she clearly wants to be heard. Her words are tainted with a listen-to-me tone.

“I thought we were in a state of austerity, but I guess not if you’re the prime minister’s wife.”

“Future wife,” a girl corrects her in an almost hopeful voice.

“I heard Patton’s gone crazy,” the girl says. “I think this whole thing proves how paranoid he’s become.”

“Oh, I heard that, too! But they’re saying he’s a shoo-in for the next election.”

I want to ask who they are hearing these things from, but I keep silent.

“I think something strange is going on,” a girl says. “Patton isn’t just going crazy. It’s like he’s a different person.”

“Well, that person is going to win reelection,” chirps another.

“And I assume you are all on such familiar terms with *Minister* Patton that you’re comfortable sharing such factual accounts,” Alixandra says, stepping out from behind the group. Her face is blank and I want to know what she thinks about what the girls are saying. But as usual, she’s removed and professional—and utterly unreadable.

“No harm in a little gossip,” one of the girls says, tacking on a nervous giggle as if to imply they were only being silly.

Alixandra leans in and sizes her up before shifting back onto the heels of her boots. “There’s a lot of harm in it, but not for the person being gossiped about, if you catch my drift.”

Most of them nod, but as soon as she steps away their faces turn nasty behind her back. I’m certain Alixandra can feel their expressions, even if she doesn’t see them. I recall the sensation of tiny daggers in my back, a feeling familiar from my testing. Unlike me, Alixandra doesn’t seem bothered by it.

But I have learned one thing, at least. I’m not the only one concerned about changes in Cormac Patton. It sounds like the rumors are becoming more widespread. People everywhere are talking about it. What effect will this have on his plans? If faith in Cormac has already been undermined, what purpose can the wedding really serve?

“We’re ready for the next party,” the stewardess says, checking a list on her clipboard.

“That’s us,” Alixandra says, taking hold of my elbow and steering me toward the rebound chamber. We aren’t using the ones I’ve rebounded through before, but instead a new, larger chamber. I expect Alixandra and I to rebound on the same platform, but there are two platforms adjoining each other instead.

“I thought we would rebound together,” I say to Alixandra.

“We are, but two people need to perform the procedure for optimal safety.” Her voice takes on the same annoyed tone it always does when I ask a question—as though everything that comes out of my mouth is completely stupid.

“I see.”

“Minister Patton wants to be sure of your physical safety as well as your security.”

“I bet he does,” I say. My glib comment is rewarded with a scathing look. My sense of humor isn’t growing on Alixandra.

The stewardess prepares each of us, going through the same speech full of warnings and reminders I’ve been given every time I’ve traveled via rebound. I nod, barely paying attention to what she’s saying. I’m not surprised when she cuffs my arms to the chair.

“What, no scary metal helmet?” I ask.

The stewardess blinks.

“You will be alone during part of the process,” Alixandra says, settling comfortably into her chair. “We’ll be able to see each other, but technically we’ll be in separate spaces. I want to be certain you are secure.”

“Where am I going to go?” I point out. There’s enough danger inherent in the process without me jumping off the platform in the middle of it.

“You’ve managed to pull off some incredible escapes in the past. You can’t blame us for being cautious,” Alixandra says.

“How long is the rebound?” I ask the stewardess.

“It will only take an hour,” she answers as she stuffs a pillow behind my back. I want out of these cuffs and away from this awkward angle.

The pillow *is* helping, though. I remember the first stewardess who attended my rebound—on my retrieval night. She had been kind, too,

trying to ease my panic about being tied down and taken to a new life. I didn't ask her name.

"Thank you—?" I leave the invitation hanging between myself and the girl helping me.

"Diana," she says.

"Thank you, Diana."

"It was my pleasure, Miss Lewys," she says, pausing to add the obligatory, "and best wishes on your marriage."

"Thanks," I say. Her eyes meet mine and I see understanding in them. She knows, as everyone in Arras must know, that this isn't a marriage of love. Cormac is taking a bride. He's taking me.

And before I can wrap my head around it—around the fact that I'm on my way to be married to Cormac Patton—Diana has left the room and the countdown on the clock begins.

"Will I be able to talk to you during the rebound?" I ask Alixandra. Rebounds still make me a little nervous.

"Why would we want to talk?"

"Never mind," I say.

"Do you need to tell me something, Adelice?"

"I get a little bit of motion sickness," I admit, "and it might help if I had someone to distract me."

She looks pained at this suggestion.

"Like I said, forget it." I hadn't needed Alixandra's company before today. I didn't need it now.

"Adelice, it's my job to protect you, not only for Cormac," she says, struggling for the right words. For a moment our eyes meet and her carefully controlled composure slips to reveal vulnerability.

"Who are you doing it for, then?" I ask.

The mask slides back into place as she picks up a *Bulletin* from the table on the platform. "The people of Arras, of course. You've become something of a symbol to them."

"I don't believe you," I say, but Alixandra only shrugs. I can't expect answers from her.

And how am I supposed to feel about being a symbol, anyway? First, it's for the wrong reasons. What would my parents think if I came to represent the ideal of womanhood in Arras? Or Erik? Or Jost? Or Dante?

How would they feel if I stepped into the role of perfect wife and obedient citizen? It wasn't supposed to turn out like this.

It won't.

I focus on that thought as the countdown clock reaches zero and the first changes shimmer through the room. I wonder what Spinster they've deemed talented enough to rush the rebound process and I hope her fingers are as skillful as they claim. It's not my idea of a good time to be torn in two by someone integrating my thread into another section of Arras.

The smooth white walls of the room flicker and fade in and out of my vision, and my belly flips as a rush of vertigo surges through my body. I turn to watch Alixandra, who is absorbed in her *Bulletin*. I can see her, but it's as though I'm watching through a sheer, stretched fabric. We are in the same place and yet we aren't.

"Alixandra," I test, but she doesn't respond.

I'm on my way to marry Cormac Patton.

Only a month has passed since he asked me to marry him. I thought it would be far in the future, but now it's happening.

There will be a state dinner and a series of Stream interviews. Fear is starting to settle into my blood. This seemed like a good idea when I agreed to it. Having unlimited access to Cormac would give me the chance to alter him *and* gain access to the Coventry. But now I know having unlimited access to Cormac means he'll have unlimited access to me. I also know he'll find a way to diminish my power, possibly for good. My skills are nothing against him now that he's found a way to protect himself from alteration, and soon, I'm certain, he'll alter me into the perfect wife.

It's only beginning to sink in that I will be his wife. On the happier nights since I was taken from my home in Romen, I'd allowed myself to imagine marrying. I'd pictured what it would be like to lie in bed with my husband. When I returned to Arras, I tried to let go of that, but Erik always invaded my thoughts in the quiet moments before sleep. I tried to deny myself the fantasy that somehow Erik would be the one in my marital bed, because I knew this day would come.

I knew it would only hurt more when I faced down my wedding to Cormac.

I was right.

A tear tickles down my cheek and I try to wipe it away, forgetting the cuffs over my wrists. It lingers, turning to salt on my cheek—an invisible line that no one can see, but I can feel it clinging tight to my skin. Love has left its marks on me in a hundred tiny scars that aren't visible, only felt. Erik's face floats into my memory. I squeeze my eyes shut and try to see him, but no matter how much I try it becomes harder. My mind is stealing him from me, hiding him away to protect me from the ache that burns in my chest and seizes my limbs.

When I open my eyes, I see him more clearly. It's as though he's standing in front of me. I realize that if I want to keep Erik, I can't lock him away. I can't ignore the memory of him or I will lose even that. Because when I embrace the pain of our separation—when I free his memory—he becomes real again.

Erik smiles at me and I smile back, tears streaming down my face. It becomes too painful and I turn away.

Alixandra is off the platform.

I stare at her. She's not supposed to leave the platform. That's rebound rule number one.

At first I think she's waving at me and I shake my head to let her know I have no idea what she's saying. I can barely move my hands, but I point a finger at her chair in case she's suffering some type of temporary insanity that can be cured by a simple reminder that she should be sitting down.

That's when I realize she's trying to tear the sheer barrier separating her rebound platform from mine. I look more carefully at her room and notice that it's fading farther and farther into the gray walls of the Cypress Station. Soon Alixandra begins to fade with it.

It isn't possible. We're rebounding together. She shouldn't be fading from my sight, because we're going to the same room, the same station. Alixandra told me I wouldn't leave her side during this process, and as that realization settles into place, she flickers completely out of view.

But my last vision of her isn't one of screaming or grabbing. For the split second before her rebound completes she looks past me and nods as her hands fly up once more to tear at the barrier.

I whip around and see the dark outlines of a rebound chamber. The clock on the wall is dead. The room is chilly.

But standing in the middle of it is something that warms my blood.

Erik.

SEVENTEEN

I CAN'T MOVE UNTIL THE FINAL PIECES of the room settle into place. Erik is real. Erik is here.

He takes a cautious step toward me.

This time I manage to say his name. "Erik?"

He races forward and unlatches my cuffs, pulling me up and into a tight hug. But before I can even enjoy it, he releases me.

I don't know where we are or how I've gotten here. The chamber is silent and abnormally cold. These facts collect in my mind but they don't add up to anything.

"Follow me." It's little more than a command, and for a moment I'm frozen to the spot. But when he walks out of the room, I go after him despite the shock and confusion warring within me.

I step out into an office. No, not exactly an office. More like a large meeting room dimly lit by lamps and handlights. Before I can react, Valery throws her arms around me.

"They did it," she says in a breathless voice.

I'm not entirely sure who they are or what they did or how it happened, but I nod as she clasps my hands in her own. She looks the same, but she's free of cosmetics and her black hair is cropped to her chin.

"Do you like it?" she asks, fluffing her bob.

"Yes. It suits you." The whole conversation is surreal. The last time I saw Valery she'd admitted that she betrayed us on Alcatraz, but now she is here. That doesn't exactly explain where *here* is, though.

"Get those off." She points to my gloves.

It takes a moment for the suggestion to process, but when it does, I rip them from my sweaty hands and throw them to the floor.

"Thanks," I say to her over a lump in my throat as it begins to settle in that I'm free.

A dozen people gather around a table, poring over blueprints of some sort, and when a man stands up to leave, I see them.

Dante and Jost.

They're both here.

"Where are we?" I ask Erik, grabbing his arm. He removes my hand quickly but I don't think I'm imagining a gentle squeeze as he does it.

"We got her," Erik calls out, and everyone stops to stare at me. There are a few cheers. Some eye me with curiosity. Others look unimpressed. But all that matters is the grin that splits across Dante's face, because for a moment I feel like I've come home.

He strides forward and grabs me by the shoulders. He's still wearing the jeans and shirt he wore to Alcatraz, and he looks tired.

"You look different," he says.

"I've been busy preparing to become Cormac's little woman," I say, but I can barely focus on what he's saying to me. I'm too busy scanning the room, trying to process the incredible shift in my circumstances. Not even an hour ago I was on the way to my wedding, and now I'm here—wherever this is.

"But you aren't married?" Erik asks, and I think I hear a tinge of anxiety in his tone.

"No, I'm not."

"Thank Arras. I was worried we missed the blessed event," Dante says.

"Were you hoping to give me away?" I ask.

"I was planning to object."

"You weren't the only one," Erik says.

"You were just in time," I tell them. "I was on my way to the wedding."

"We had less time to strategize until we got here," Dante says. "Relative timelines, remember?"

"Yes, but where *is* here?" I ask. I turn around and take in the whole of my surroundings. I can't help but notice a line of framed portraits along a far wall. The room is average. It could be any meeting room in Arras, but that doesn't explain how my friends managed to set up in Arras. "Are those prime ministers?"

"You're in the Eastern Ministry offices," Dante explains.

"The Eastern Sector was destroyed."

“Do you believe everything Cormac tells you?” Dante asks. He drags me to a window that overlooks a courtyard. When I spot the elephant fountains, I know he’s telling the truth.

I was here a little less than a month ago, but now it’s been entirely transformed into an Agenda barricade. Only the shell of the room reminds me it was once Guild territory before Cormac destroyed it—or rather, pretended to. “Why would Cormac lie to me? He told me he destroyed the whole sector. He made me watch.”

“To scare you.” Valery’s voice is soft as she speaks. “Fear is control.”

She’s right. How often had I demurred to Cormac’s wishes to keep him calm? I was afraid of the havoc he’d wreak on the innocent people surrounding us. I hadn’t considered that it might be a ploy.

“Cormac severed the sector, which means it will die soon enough,” Dante tells me. “He didn’t have to bother with destroying it. The sector can’t self-sustain for more than a few months without the Spinsters. If the mines on Earth fail, it could be years—possibly decades or centuries—before their loss threatens the entirety of Arras. The Eastern Sector has considerably less time, though, because Cormac left no Spinsters and the looms are mostly destroyed.”

“How long have you been here?” I ask.

“That depends,” Dante says, gesturing toward Jost and Erik. “We followed you immediately, but it took us a while to get word to those on Earth. We’re only beginning to get a handle on the situation. Thankfully the Agenda has spread throughout most of Arras, so we managed to regroup quickly.”

“So you’ve been here since the severance of the Eastern Sector?” I ask.

“We arrived not long after. You were already gone. Cormac practically handed the place over. It’s allowed us a safe place to plan, but some of us only arrived in the last few days. Falon got here yesterday.”

Falon glances up at the mention of her name, meeting Dante’s eyes and then quickly looking away. She flips her dark hair over her shoulder so that it covers her face like a curtain. Although Falon was the first person we encountered on Earth, I’d spent little time with her. Now I couldn’t tell if the cold shoulder she was giving us was aimed at me or Dante. She’d made it clear to me the last time I saw her that she didn’t

appreciate Dante not keeping her in the loop. If she hadn't known where he was until a few days ago, I understood her anger.

Dante had been here for weeks, along with Jost and Erik, and I hadn't even known. I wonder for a moment whether Pryana and the Agenda at the Western Coventry had any clue. Probably not, I decide. The risk to the heart of the Agenda would have been too great. The more important an operation is, the more secret it needs to be, I suppose.

It seems Falon might not have known where Dante was either. I recognize the cold shoulder, especially since Erik is giving it to me, too.

"I have lots to tell you," I say, trying to focus on something important instead of the ice spreading through my body in reaction to Erik's dismissive behavior.

"Soon," Dante says. He gestures for me to join him at a nearby table and as people clear a place for us I see that Einstein and Jax are there, too, discussing a complicated-looking equation scrawled across a sheet of paper. They're busy making adjustments, each bickering about the other's changes. It's quite the sight—lanky young Jax taking on Albert with his lined face and decades of wisdom. Jax worked for Kincaid on Earth, but he'd been using his considerable intelligence to help the Agenda. He might have met his match with Albert though.

"Hello!" I call out, waving excitedly to them. Despite the surprise of all this and of Erik's strange attitude, I'm genuinely pleased to see both of them.

"My young Whorl," Albert says, his bushy eyebrows rising with his smile.

"It's only been a month since you told me I was the Whorl, but I still don't understand what it means," I admit as I sink into the chair next to him.

"In time," Albert says. "There is much to discuss."

Like why Erik is acting as if he doesn't know me. Or how the Agenda set up its headquarters in the Eastern Sector without Cormac even knowing about it. I'd especially like to know how they managed to rebound me away despite the security assigned to me.

"I'm sure you have a million questions," Dante says, dropping into a seat across from me. "But we're in the middle of an operation right now.

We had to adjust our strategy to capture you when we got the intel you'd be rebounding."

"How did you do it?" I ask. "I can barely go to the powder room by myself these days. My rebound should have been secure."

"It's nearly impossible to breach a secure rebound session," Dante says.

"I know. But if it's impossible, how did you do it?" I ask again.

"Nothing's impossible for a Creweler," a familiar voice says behind me.

I spin around in my seat, knowing that *this* is the one thing that should be impossible—even for a Creweler.

"I learned a few new tricks while you were away," Loricel tells me.

"Such as how to come back to life?" I can't keep the shock out of my question.

"Not even I can achieve that," she says. Loricel purses her lips and stares like she expects better of me. Without her smart suit and done-up hair she reminds me of my grandmother. She looks smaller than the last time I saw her, as though the weight of things has deflated her. But I still have no doubt: she's the most powerful woman I've ever known. "Did you think Cormac had the guts to terminate me?"

"He claimed he did," I say.

"He tried, but you know Cormac. He's a hoarder. If something shows the least bit of usefulness to him, he'll keep it around just in case." Loricel gives me a wink that's anything but amused. I can tell she wants us to continue this conversation in private.

I want to ask how she escaped, but I decide to wait until she brings it up herself.

"What's this mission?" I ask, recalling Dante's statement.

"We've managed to gather some important intelligence from local sources and public records," Dante tells me.

"Is it regarding Protocol Three?" I ask, hoping to finally have some answers.

"No," Dante says slowly. "What do you know about Protocol Three?"

"It's something I overheard Cormac say. It's probably nothing to worry about," I say. Dante doesn't look convinced.

Jost speaks up behind me and somehow, despite everything that's happened between us, I feel the fluttering of tiny wings in my chest at the sound of his voice. "We know where Sebrina is."

I turn toward Jost, unsure what to say to him. His blue eyes meet mine and there's fire in them. There's an electricity in the air around him, waiting to be unleashed. Finding Sebrina is all he's ever wanted, and even now, I want it for him.

"I remember she was rewoven into the Eastern Sector," I say. I'd found the information on the night we escaped from Arras to Earth. Even then Jost had been separated from her for almost three years, believing the whole time that she was dead—a victim of the Guild's warning to Jost's hometown. I cried for them both the night Cormac severed the Eastern Sector.

"They destroyed most of the files when they cut this sector off from Arras," Jax says, cracking his fingers as he speaks. "I had to get into the Guild's mainframe to recover the information. It took me a couple days. "

Jax gives Jost an apologetic look, but Jost waves it off. "The important thing is that we found her."

"Is she still here?" I ask in a small voice.

Dante steps forward and nods. "We have every reason to believe she's still within the Eastern Sector."

"Even ministers that evacuated left their families," Jax says.

I nod my head, already knowing this. I wonder for a moment if Grady left. "I watched Cormac tell a man to abandon his family because he could get a new one."

"You were there?" Erik's jaw tenses as he asks.

"I didn't want to be," I snap. He must know I tried to stop it.

"It's pretty clear that Protocol Two quarantines everyone in the sector who isn't a high-ranking Guild official."

"They must protect their secret," Loricel says in a soft but cutting tone.

I take a step back and meet Loricel's eyes once more. Does this mean she knew about the officials all along? Had she seen it before, herself?

When I first met Loricel, I wondered how old she was. I thought I had an idea after her short mentorship of me at the Coventry, but now I'm no longer sure. She still has paper-thin skin, creased with age, and the same

silver hair. At some point, she allowed herself to age rather than maintain the charade of perpetual youth.

“Older than you think,” she says.

It’s clear Loricel remembers every moment that’s transpired between us. And as she says the words—words she spoke to me at our first meeting—I realize she’s been telling me the truth the whole time.

I just didn’t hear her.

She knew about the Guild and how far renewal technology could go, but she hadn’t told me. Loricel had covered up the Guild’s biggest secret: they made themselves immortal at the cost of other people’s lives; their own life spans were extended using the time strands of people whose lives the Guild had cut short.

“If Sebrina is out there,” I say, trying to focus on the task at hand and not on the questions burning through my brain about Loricel’s secrets, “we need to go after her.”

Despite the chaos and strategizing going on around us, Dante grins at this. He looks a bit maniacal. It’s how I know we’re related.

“That’s our next order of business.”

EIGHTEEN

THE STREETS ARE DESERTED, AS THOUGH THE citizens are still abiding by the quarantine Cormac placed on the sector before he severed it. I can tell people have been out of their homes, though. Glass crunches under our feet from the shattered remains of storefront windows. The food co-op is devoid of rations. I wonder how many mothers and fathers fought one another for the little bit of food stocked on its shelves. I wonder how many people have run out of food entirely after the Eastern Sector's time in limbo. This is how Cormac left things. When he severed the sector in front of me, I thought he was a monster. But knowing that he left millions of people to starve in the dark makes me question if the word *monster* can even begin to describe him.

I trade my traveling suit and heels for something more practical—boots and jeans. Valery's shorter than I am, and her jeans and tunic are a bit too short and tight on me to be comfortable, but it's still better than running around in a skirt and stockings.

"We have to move quickly because we estimate resources will run out in as little as two weeks here," Dante explains to me.

"And what happens then?"

"People will start to die." He blows out a long sigh of frustration. "We need to evacuate everyone between now and then."

"Dante," I whisper. I'm not sure I want Jost to hear what I have to say. He has to be worried enough about Sebrina as it is. "Doesn't it seem too quiet to you here?"

Dante gives me a quick bob of the head that the others don't see. "On the one hand, it follows the pattern of behavior of the people left behind on Earth after the exodus. There's clearly been looting. Most food supplies are compromised. But you're right. On the other hand, it's too quiet."

"What do you think is going on?"

"I'm not sure," Dante says. "But it's not a coincidence if the Guild's involved."

Jost and Erik walk a hundred yards ahead of us, watching for danger. Valery trails between us and the Bell brothers. I want to ask her to join us, but I need to talk to Dante and I'm not sure I trust her yet. She may have proven herself to the others somehow, but her betrayal is still fresh to me.

Watching Jost and Erik in the distance, I can't help but think they're both avoiding me, and yet the sight of them working together makes me smile. They've become friends again in the time I've been gone.

"And those two?" I motion toward the brothers.

"They seem to have reached some sort of agreement after Cormac took you. It was pretty obvious since they stopped bickering all the time. Bit of a relief, actually."

"Cormac didn't take me," I correct him.

"It's pretty hard for a man to admit when a woman's sacrificed herself for him," Dante says. "It's pretty hard for a father to admit it, too."

"What a waste of energy," I say.

"Says the one worrying about semantics." Dante shines his handlight over his face and raises an eyebrow. "You have a point."

Jost holds up a hand for us to stop. We slow down and wait as he moves forward a few steps into an alley. His figure disappears behind a building, and Erik follows him. Both brothers are swallowed by darkness and before I can call out to her, Valery goes in after them.

"Do they think that I'm going to wait around here and—"

A piercing scream shatters the night.

Dante and I race toward the alley, skidding to a stop at its dark mouth. Ahead of us is a figure, barely visible under the blacked-out sky. Dante flips on his handlight and the beam scatters across the figure. It's Erik. He waves for us to put the light away.

"Remind me to speak with him about hanging out in dark alleys without handlights," Dante mutters. He doesn't turn it off, but instead points it at the ground.

"Deal."

We approach Erik cautiously, unsure what to expect, but as soon as we're even with him, Dante's light reveals Jost crouched near the wall of the alley.

“What’s he—” But I don’t have to finish my question because as my eyes adjust to the darkness I see that Jost is not alone.

“Shhh!” Erik warns, and that’s when I hear the voices. One is calm and reassuring, but the other comes in fits of words punctuated by giggles and wails.

I move closer to Jost but the woman he’s speaking to startles and scuttles farther down the alley.

“Don’t come any closer,” Jost warns.

He calls out to the woman, but she only scrambles farther away from us in fits and jerks.

“What’s going on?” Dante asks, and then he flashes the handlight in our direction. The woman screams as the light hits her and I realize she’s not a woman. She’s a girl not much older than me.

But everything about her is wrong. In the light her pupils are wide and black, and that’s not even the most frightening thing. The whites of her eyes have gone red and her skin droops into giant jowls from her jawline. Some of it has detached entirely and something under the surface ripples. No, *crawls*. She hisses and wails and laughs as she scratches her fingers across the brick walls. It’s as though she’s decaying while she’s still alive.

“Jost,” I say, loud enough that he can hear. “We should go.”

I take a careful step forward and touch his shoulder.

“She needs help,” he says, flashing me a disappointed look.

“We can’t help her,” I say.

“Dante can help her,” Jost corrects me, “and Erik.”

So Erik has finally admitted to his brother that he’s a Tailor.

“Then let’s talk to them.” I pull Jost’s arm, urging him back to the others.

When we reach them, Dante and Erik are discussing something in grim voices. Valery hugs her arms to her chest and I place a reassuring hand on her shoulder. She doesn’t look up, and Dante’s expression is grave.

“That girl needs your help,” Jost says. “I know you can patch.”

“Jost.” Erik places a hand on his brother’s shoulder. “I have basic patching skills. I don’t think I can do anything about that much … damage.”

“I alter by feel,” Dante says apologetically. “I don’t have the medic training or equipment for such a severe case of …”

“So that’s it?” I ask, frustrated by how unfeeling they both sound. Beside me Jost straightens a little in response to my indignation, as though he’s physically backing up my moral stance.

“It’s not only that.” Erik pauses. “I’ve never seen damage like this before.”

“That doesn’t mean you can’t fix it,” I say firmly.

Behind us the girl bellows out a groan that grows strangled as she gasps for air. Jost takes a step toward her, but Erik grabs him, holding him back from helping her.

The girl’s skin sags as she lifts her hands out to us, her flesh falling in sickening lumps to the ground. Her cry grows weaker, echoing from some pit deep inside her, until she is silent and still.

I can’t tear my eyes from her body. I did nothing to help her. I only watched her die.

We stand in mute shock as we try to process what we’ve witnessed.

“Didn’t she remind you of anything?” Erik asks us finally.

I don’t have to think hard. The frenetic speech pattern, the animal-like responses, and most of all, her strange appearance.

“A Remnant,” I say. “But Remnants are more controlled than she was, and her skin wasn’t scarred.”

“I don’t think she was altered,” Erik says. He speaks in slow, measured words. “This is something else entirely.”

I shiver at the thought. I want them to help her, but I can’t deny this is something we haven’t faced before. “It was like she was decaying.”

“I think that’s exactly what happened to her,” Erik says.

“Do you know something about this?” Dante asks him. “From your work with the Guild?”

Erik holds his hands up. He doesn’t look guilty but it’s obvious Dante doesn’t trust him yet. “There were a lot of rumors flying around the Coventry. I never knew what to believe. The Guild was always testing new weapons and alterations. If I had to guess, I think that’s what we’re dealing with. But I have no experience with *this*.”

“Did you touch her?” Dante asks Jost.

“No, why?”

“Until we know what it is we need to assume it’s contagious.”

“I saw it,” I tell them. “It was like a swarm of insects.”

Dante looks to Erik, who nods slowly. I know he saw it, too.

“It’s possible,” Erik says. “They altered people to create Remnants. It wouldn’t be that hard to manipulate animals or insects in similar ways.”

“You think it was an altered bug?” If he’s right there’s a good possibility I’ll be seeing these things in my dreams.

“They dictated what came into Arras. They could eradicate entire species, or …” Erik trails away, leaving us to our imaginations.

“Or create weapons,” Dante finishes.

“We should keep moving,” Erik suggests. I nod in agreement, but before we make it out of the alley a man appears at its end, blocking our departure. He has the same decaying appearance as the dead girl.

“We need to get out now,” I murmur.

“You want to run past him?” Dante asks. He has a point. “We need a distraction.”

Erik rummages through his rucksack but comes up empty-handed. “We can shoot him,” he suggests weakly.

I don’t even know what to say to that suggestion. But I don’t have any suggestions of my own. In this strange severed existence, I cannot be sure my powers will work. I could do more harm than good.

“We don’t know how the disease travels. We don’t want any of his blood flying around. It’s too dangerous,” Dante says.

“I’m out of ideas,” Erik says.

If we touch the man, we could become infected. But how are we going to get past him without touching him or hurting him?

Dante motions for us to huddle together, but as we come closer, I notice something is off. Our group is smaller.

“Wait. Where’s Val?” I ask, but I’m afraid I already know. I pop my head out of our cluster and immediately spot her. She’s no longer waiting silently by us. I know what she’s doing. And I know why. Valery, so in need of validation after her betrayal, so eager to prove herself, is going to sacrifice herself. It is too late to stop her.

“Val!” Jost shouts, trying to call her back, but she’s already only a few steps from the decaying man. She turns just as his arms close over her

frail figure. When the man opens his mouth, a swarm of insects spills out, engulfing Valery. They cover her skin in a teeming black coat.

“No!” I yell. My fingers whip through the air, trying to latch on to the weave around us, but Dante grabs my hand.

“Stop,” he commands me. It’s only then that I see the tear I’ve left in my wake. The weave around it frays, unraveling into thin, brittle strands. This world is dying. Valery is dying. And I can’t do anything to stop it.

Valery calls into the dead night, but her words are soft. The only one I’m sure I understand is, “*Run!*”

“It’s too late,” Dante says, dragging me beside him. I know he’s right. As we rush past Valery, the insects have vanished, but then I see them trembling along under her skin as it puckers and bubbles until the bugs begin to strip her flesh. Even through her agony, she manages a small smile.

My fingers reach toward her, but Dante pushes me out of the alley and away from her.

“Did anyone touch the girl?” Dante demands.

I can’t bring myself to answer his question. Valery will be dead soon. There’s no way to stop it. If one of us is infected, we all will be soon.

“Ad!” Dante shakes me.

“She’s clean,” Erik says. “If any of us were infected, there would already be signs. You saw how quickly it infected Valery.” He places a protective arm around my shoulder, and Dante turns his attention to the rest of us. No one shows signs of infection. We have to hope we’re safe, but the truth is that none of us knows what we’re dealing with.

We keep our lights on and move in a huddle. No one talks. A sense of shared urgency pulses among us.

“Why would she do that?” Dante finally says. His words are a mix of disgust and admiration, and I’m almost certain he’s not looking for an answer.

“Guilt.” Erik answers anyway, though his eyes never waver from the street ahead of us. “She betrayed us. This was her way of making it right.”

I want to thank him for this obvious answer, but I know I’m looking for an outlet for my anger. I want to crack a joke and make the ache in

my chest go away. But it’s not going to be that easy this time. If it was ever that easy before.

“She didn’t have to get herself killed.” Erik’s words are few, but full of meaning.

“Sometimes death is the only absolution,” Dante says.

I shake my head. I don’t buy that for one minute. “There is no absolution in death, only escape.”

“There’s absolution in sacrifice,” Erik says softly. I hear it in his voice—the pain of his own sacrifice. But what has he given up, and why?

“Sebrina’s house should be another block,” Jost says, switching the topic to something practical to distract us from what we’ve lost.

“What if she isn’t there?” I ask, immediately wishing I hadn’t.

“She’s there,” Jost says. There’s not a trace of doubt in his voice.

I wish I had that kind of conviction. I wish it were as simple as deciding to believe—in our plan, in the future, in who I am. My world is so tinged with little gray lies I can’t be sure I know what to do or what to believe in anymore. The Eastern Sector is playing tricks on my mind.

The darkness creeps around us and I’m reminded of the world I left behind at the Coventry. But here the monster we face cannot be outwitted. It’s simply a matter of being faster than it.

It’s as simple as not being touched.

NINETEEN

THE STREET IS FULL OF HOUSES THAT blend into the night, each perfectly plain and unobtrusive. The trees are dying, their thin branches drooping like broken limbs to the clumps of grass and remains of plants in each yard. What was once precise and pleasing is now a neighborhood of ghosts. Any of these houses could be infested by whatever the Guild has unleashed. There's no vitality to the weave. Tarnished time threads knit through the brittle, frayed threads that make up the world around us. Only a few hours ago I believed there was no Eastern Sector. Now that I'm here I know that, without looms, there won't be one much longer. Everything here is dying as time and space slip back into the universe.

We quietly pass each house and I realize I'm holding my breath, waiting for the next attack.

None comes and that almost makes it worse.

The space between fear and anticipation is a waking nightmare of recrimination and doubt. I'm perpetually trapped in the knowledge of my own inferiority.

Could I make the sacrifice Valery did?

Would it even matter in the end?

The farther we walk in silence, the more questions tumble through my head. I have no answers and the lack of finality breeds more doubts until my mind is numb, overstuffed with questions I can never answer. It is a table of plates with no food—a feast of famine to gorge my mind on as we move closer to Sebrina.

I focus myself on this mission. I *can* effect change. I *can* save Jost's daughter.

I can.

I can.

I can.

I repeat it over and over in my head, but I come no closer to believing it.

Jost stops in front of one of the houses and we wait for him to give us instructions. After a few minutes I realize he's as stuck as I am, caught in a loop of self-doubt.

I take his hand and hold it. "Let's get Sebrina."

But he doesn't move, only turns to look at me. There's something imploring in his eyes. "What if she's dead?"

"She's not." I channel his earlier certainty and try to sound as confident as he did then.

"She won't know me," Jost says. "I'm a stranger, not her father."

This time Dante is the one to speak. "You will always be her father. Nothing can change that."

A lump grows in my throat. Poor Dante is the closest to understanding how Jost feels.

I know what scares Jost. He's worried that after everything he's gone through to find her, Sebrina will reject him. How do you swallow the truth after a diet of lies?

"Let's check it out," Erik says, pushing past us.

I want to stop him because I can't bear to watch another person walk into the unknown. Instead, I follow him, circling the house to check for signs of people.

The house appears deserted.

"I think it's abandoned," I say to Erik.

He gives me a grim look and he doesn't have to say what I know he's thinking. *Or they're dead.*

"We won't know until we go in," Jost says, moving toward the door.

It's locked. His hand balls into a fist, but before he can knock against it, the door opens a crack.

"Are you the doctor?" a small voice asks.

Jost drops to his knees until he's level with the child peeping through the crack.

"We've come to help." His voice is husky and I can hear the tears he's holding back.

"My parents are sick," the child says. "They won't come out of their room."

My stomach turns over. They have the virus.

Does Sebrina?

I bend down and smile at her. “Can we come in and help?”

There’s a moment of hesitation, but the girl nods.

As I stand up, Dante whispers in my ear, “Don’t touch her.”

I don’t like that he said it. Not only because I hate what he’s thinking, but also because I worry what will happen to Jost if Sebrina is ill. And because this is now an introduction layered with fear instead of joy.

The door opens and there she is. Already half my height, I know she has to be nearly five years old with the time we’ve spent on Earth. I expect to see the same calculation in Jost’s eyes when I turn to speak to him. But it’s not there.

Sebrina was a baby when the Guild took her from Jost. Now she’s a young girl, self-sufficient enough to open the door for the doctor. She has wide, curious eyes that are the same blue as her father’s. But her hair is dark and curly. She wrinkles her nose and crosses her arms as she takes us in.

“You don’t look like doctors,” she says.

“We’re not,” I say, gesturing to Jost but adding quickly, “They are.”

As Tailors, Dante and Erik are as close to doctors as it’s possible for any of us to be right now.

“What are you doing?” Dante whispers in my ear. “We can’t save her parents. We have no renewal patches and no medicine. They’re probably already dead!”

Sebrina’s eyes flash up to his and her lower lip trembles.

“How long have your parents been sick?” I ask her, ignoring Dante’s paranoia and taking her small hand.

“Father left to get food. He said it was too dark for me to come along, but I miss going outside and I miss the sun.” She speaks in the rambles of a young child, trying to get the information out as quickly as possible, but getting distracted along the way.

“I know.” I squeeze her hand. “When did your father go out for food?”

“I don’t know,” she says, tears welling in her eyes.

“Ad,” Erik calls, and I find him in the kitchen. “He managed to find some.” On the counter sit a few boxes of co-op instant dinners.

“Who knows how long they’ve been there, though,” I say quietly to him.

Sebrina perks up. “I’ve only had one. I made it last until I fell asleep.”

The pride is evident in her voice, even though she has no idea how much she’s really told me.

“He must have gone out in the last few days,” I say to Erik. “Maybe not long ago if she’s only had one.”

“Then her parents could still be alive,” he says. To the right of us, Jost draws in a long breath and I remember that Sebrina still has one living parent and immediately feel guilty.

“We should bring her with us,” Dante says. “Even if they’re alive, they won’t be much longer.”

I’m not sure what to expect Jost to say in this moment. He’s waited for years to get his daughter back. He lost too much time trying to find her, yet he doesn’t sweep in and scoop her up. Instead he shakes his head. “I want to talk to her … parents.”

“They’re infected,” Erik reminds him.

“I don’t expect you to understand. I barely do myself. But what the Guild did—these people had no part of it,” he says slowly, as though he’s working through it himself. “They took care of her when I couldn’t. I need them to know she’ll be cared for now.”

I can’t pretend to understand his feelings. It’s the barrier that’s always stood between Jost and me. I’ve never felt anything as deeply as he does.

“Where are your parents?” Jost trips over the word as he asks.

Sebrina takes his hand and leads him into a short hallway. The house reminds me of my home in Romen. Simple and efficient. Bathroom, kitchen, dining room, living room, and two bedrooms. Sebrina is the only child, so they wouldn’t need a bigger house. The Guild gave her to them for being steady and responsible and to make up for something the government couldn’t control. But this is how it will end for them: victims of the government they obeyed.

Sebrina stops in front of a closed door and looks up to Jost with large eyes. He crouches down next to her. “I’m going to talk to your parents now. I want you to wait out here.”

I move forward to take her back into the other room, but Erik beats me there. Before I can react, Erik picks her up and takes her away from the bedroom door.

Jost's eyes meet mine and I raise an eyebrow. Things between them have certainly changed since I left.

"Come with me?" he asks.

"Always."

He raps softly on the door but there's no response. He knocks again, more loudly, and the door shakes as something bumps against it.

"Jost …" I say in a low voice.

He raises a finger and we wait, our breath in our throats.

"I'm here to help," Jost calls. "Your daughter says you're sick."

"Go away." The voice coming through the door is rough and shallow.

"Please," Jost says, more insistent. "I need to talk to you about your daughter."

The door opens a fraction, but we can't see the person behind the door. "Is she safe?"

"Yes. I can explain if you'll open the door."

"No!" the woman cries. "You mustn't come in here. You have to take her away."

"I will," Jost promises. "But there's something you should know. I'm Sebrina's father. Her biological father. I've been looking for her for a long time."

There's a long pause before the woman responds. "The Guild told us she was an orphan."

"They told me she was dead," he says. "I wanted to—"

"I didn't know!" The woman's voice is a shriek and I can hear how hard she clings to control as illness ravages her body.

"I wanted to thank you," Jost says, placing a hand on the door. "And I wanted you to know she'll be safe with me."

"There's no safety left in Arras." A choking sound accompanies the words.

"I'm taking her away from Arras. She'll be safe. I promise you."

I think of Amie, rewoven as Riya, and wonder who Jost's daughter has become. "What's her name now?"

Jost gives me a look that shows this never occurred to him before. But when her mother answers, it's not what I expect. "We call her Sebrina. We were told that was her name."

"It is," Jost says. "It always will be."

“Look after her.” Her mother sounds calmer now, as though knowing Sebrina will be safe has given her enough peace to cope as she dies.

“Goodbye.” I leave the farewell lingering between us as Jost turns and takes his daughter from Erik. She doesn’t fight him. It’s as though she somehow knows he will care for her, even though she can’t remember him. Sometimes love survives everything, even the darkest hours.

TWENTY

ON DANTE'S ORDER, THE AGENDA MEMBERS LEFT at the Guild offices place the facility on lockdown as soon as we enter. As it's a former Ministry complex, there are plenty of controls in place to ensure no one can get in or out without permission. But I can't help feeling as though we've locked ourselves in a cage.

"Where's Valery?" Jax asks as we enter the room.

Jost shoots him a warning look. Sebrina is in his arms, nearing sleep, but trying to keep her eyes open. I don't blame her for wanting to see where she's being taken.

"Do we have anything for her to eat?" Jost asks.

Jost refused to take the rations Sebrina's adoptive father managed to bring home. He claimed they were unsafe. He might have been right, but I knew that he wanted to make sure Sebrina's adoptive parents had food as well. Not one of us dared to tell him it was a pointless waste.

Jax manages to find some rations and the remains of a chocolate stash hidden in one of the ministers' offices. Sebrina bites off the candy in huge chunks, sighing contentedly while the rest of us watch.

"I'm going to find her somewhere to sleep," Jost tells us, gathering his daughter in his arms.

As I run my fingers along the glossy wood of the tabletop, I can't help wondering about the important decisions officials made here. In Arras there are three more tables like this, all full of officials meeting to discuss the problems Arras faces. I wonder if I'm on the list today or if Cormac has managed to cover up my escape.

"Valery?" Jax prompts as soon as Jost leaves.

I shake my head. "We were attacked. She didn't make it."

"Attacked?"

"There's something out there," Erik whispers. "A disease or a virus."

"A swarm," I say, thinking of how it descended upon Valery, disappearing into her skin. "Valery sacrificed herself so we could escape. It works quickly. She was already infected before we could reach her."

Thinking back on the attack, I'm more certain than ever that we aren't dealing with a natural phenomenon. The Guild is up to something.

"You're sure you're clean?" Jax asks. He doesn't take a step back from us, but I sense that he wants to.

"Trust me," Erik says. "You can see it. Plus, it infects quickly. By the time we saw the first victim, the woman's skin was rotting off. She hardly looked human."

"She reminded me of a Remnant," I admit. I can't get my last image of Valery out of my head, nor the words she whispered as we passed.

Valery and I had a trying relationship on Earth, but we had been friends once, in the way I had been friends with Enora, my mentor and her lover. We were kind to each other, helpful even, but neither of us truly shared who we were until it was too late. Standing here now, I realize we weren't so very different. We both lost loved ones. Neither of us ran until it was too late. The only thing that separated us was my skill. It bought me time and chances I deserved no more than Valery.

"You say their skin was rotting off?" Jax asks as we find our places at a long conference table.

"I've never seen anything like it," Erik tells him.

"I can't believe she's gone," Jax tells me in a soft voice. "She wanted to make things right with you. We talked about Enora and what she could remember. I tried to help her reverse more of the alterations they'd done to her."

"Were you successful?" I ask. Perhaps Valery's legacy would live on in helping us save the Remnants or the people affected by this disease outside.

"A little. Altering in reverse is tricky."

I think of Amie and how eager she is to remember our mutual past, despite having gone through multiple alterations.

"Whatever these things are," Dante says, "they aren't natural. They infect quickly. We encountered several infested people on our mission, all at varying stages, even the girl's adoptive mother."

"But the mother didn't hurt you?" Jax asks.

"It doesn't make any sense," I say.

"The Guild considers it genetic warfare," Albert says, settling into a seat across from me. "Why waste valuable material if it can be used to

fight your enemy? A common pest becomes an ally in warfare, even something as simple as *Tineola bisselliella*."

"What?" Erik asks.

"*Tineola bisselliella*—a common fabric moth," Albert explains. "I'm afraid this is my fault. When we considered initial concerns regarding the Cypress Project—theoretical issues and such—we discussed whether certain species on Earth might negatively impact the artificial weave. I made a joke about fabric moths."

"Do I want to know what a fabric moth is?" My stomach churns as the conversation recalls the memory of Valery's final moments.

"An insect that eats away at fabric."

"Let me guess. In this instance we're the fabric?" I say.

"I'm afraid so."

"But why? Why unleash something like that here? These people were already as good as dead," Dante points out.

"The Eastern Sector was rebelling. This ensures no one here can fight back," Loricel says.

"How was anyone in the Eastern Sector going to fight back?" I ask.

Loricel gives me a grim smile from across the table. "Cormac is a thorough man."

That's an understatement.

"And yet you escaped him," I point out.

"Patton can't stand to waste resources," Dante says.

"You knew she was alive then?" I ask, gesturing to Loricel.

"I guessed. *Alive* is relative to a Tailor, anyway. Cormac's like Kincaid in that way. When he thinks people might be valuable to him, he keeps them around." Dante shrugs as if to say this isn't a big deal.

"But how did you rescue her?" I ask.

"That's an exciting story that makes me look really good. Unfortunately, I'll have to tell you another time," he says.

"I'm not going anywhere until someone tells me what's going on!"

"I see you're going through the ungrateful-brat phase," Dante says. "We saved you. Show some gratitude."

"I had plans," I tell him. "I was going to alter Cormac, maybe take on his appearance. But now I have no chance of ever getting close enough to him again. I'll never save the rest of the Remnants or slow the drilling on

the surface. I'm sick and tired of people trying to rescue me, of everyone thinking and acting like I can do nothing right. I had enough of that from Cormac."

"Valery did it," Dante says, finally ready to answer my question. "We had enough information to guess where Cormac was keeping Loricel. With a little alteration and a lot of luck, we got in."

"And why couldn't you just tell me that?" I ask him.

"She didn't want you to know."

"Why?" I can't think of a single reason for her to keep this from me. Valery had a long way to go before she would be able to earn back my trust. Her participation in rescuing Loricel could only help in that regard.

"We barely made it out of the storage facility …" His voice fades away and slowly I begin to understand.

"Things got out of hand. I made a mistake." Dante's fingers tremble as he runs them over his cropped hair. "It's gone."

"What's gone?" I ask him in a hollow voice, afraid I already know the answer.

"The storage facility—and everything inside of it."

My body goes cold and numb with shock. There's no chance to save the Remnants now.

Except my mother, Meria, whose thread is tucked safely away in my baggage. Baggage that didn't escape with me.

"I'm sorry," he says in a soft voice. I know he is sorry, because to him it means Meria is lost forever. I saw how he looked at her when he freed her from Kincaid's estate. Some things change with time, but others never do. Love like that leaves an imprint. It might fade with time, but it's always there, waiting for you to catch it in the right light.

"Right now they have something to show us," he reminds me. I become aware of the uncomfortable glances of the others in the room. I can't bring myself to tell Dante I have Meria's soul strand, not when he destroyed our chance at saving the others.

Jax looks for confirmation that he should begin, but my father can only manage a tight nod. A beam of light catches my attention as it bursts across the far wall, illuminating a screen with the image of Arras, and I'm grateful to think about something besides dead friends and a lost mother. The image is a basic map I once saw in academy. A rectangle

with four points for the northern, southern, eastern, and western sides: the coventries. It's strange to see it now, knowing there's more to Arras than a map. This world isn't flat. Arras isn't limited by four corners. Now I see it as it is. Arras wraps and engulfs the Earth like a beautiful but deadly parasite.

Jax stands up, holding a digifile and looking a bit nervous. "This is how Arras is presented to the general population."

"I'm not sure I got that far in school," Erik says.

"Ignore everything he says," I tell Jax, motioning for him to continue.

"Okay." He swipes across the face of his digifile and the image begins to morph. "What the map doesn't show is the *dimensions* of Arras."

The map shifts into a half sphere and then a model of the Earth appears below it. Even though I've been to the other planet, I'm still in awe. It's large and blue and round. Arras hovers over about a fourth of it.

"Arras exists over Earth," Jax continues.

"We know that," Dante says, but Falon shushes him.

"As I was saying," Jax says, shooting Dante an annoyed look, "the two worlds exist relative to each other. However, Arras only exists because of Earth."

"Okay, now you've lost me—" Dante admits.

"Dear boy, you've seen the mines. Use your imagination," Albert interrupts him. The scientist is busy jotting notes. I can't figure out why. I know he understands things we can't quite grasp. But then he holds up the sheet in front of him, revealing a series of complex equations.

"I think I speak for everyone—except Jax—when I say *what?*" Erik says.

"I'm with Erik on this," I say.

"Oh never mind," Albert says. He crumples the paper into a ball and tugs off his sweater. He digs into its loose weave and begins pulling out a thread. It unravels until there's a small hole in the arm of the sweater. "I could take this yarn and make a new sweater, correct?"

I nod.

"But if I did," Albert continues, "I would destroy *this* sweater."

"So Arras is unraveling Earth," I say, "but we know that."

"Unfortunately, the existence of Earth is more vital to the universe than my sweater is," Albert says dryly. "If I unravel this sweater, it has no

great effect on space-time, except to make me a bit colder."

"What happens to the universe if Earth unravels?" I ask.

Jax jumps in. "A singularity." But then he looks sheepishly at Albert as though he's spoken out of turn.

Albert waves off Jax's interruption. "No, explain with your images. It's much easier to understand."

"I got the sweater bit," Erik says to Albert.

"What's a singularity?" Jost asks. I'm surprised he's here given that he finally has his daughter back. I suppose her return is a reminder of what he's fighting for.

"Well, it's sort of like this," says Jax.

On-screen the image shifts. We watch Arras grow from the Earth, leaving behind a hole in its wake. Although Arras stays the same, the lines of light flowing into Arras from Earth leave a larger and larger hole. Eventually the hole grows so large that Earth begins to collapse into itself. A final bright flash of light leaves nothing more than a large black circle in its wake.

"What the Arras was that?" I ask.

"That's a singularity," Albert says in a grim voice.

"Basically, by taking Earth's resources, Arras is jeopardizing Earth's existence in the universe," Jax explains.

"But where did it go? Where's Earth?" Erik asks.

"In the event of a singularity, Earth will cease to exist. A massive well of gravity will pull everything—even light—inside the singularity, destroying Earth *and* Arras." Jax pauses to let this sink in.

"What happens inside a black hole?" I ask.

"We don't know," Jax says. "Gravity is infinite in one, so it's impossible to tell."

"Meaning?"

"*Nothing*. Nothing will exist."

"So in this scenario," Erik asks slowly, "everyone dies?"

"Yes. Death. No doubt. The atoms might survive somehow and somewhere, or rather the leptons, quarks, and other subatomic knickknacks." Albert says the words with a fair amount of annoyance, as though this is all perfectly obvious. But even hearing him say it doesn't make it feel any more real.

“Cormac must not know this. Even he wouldn’t be so foolish as to destroy *everything*,” I say.

“He knows,” Jax says. “More and more of the Guild Tailors and scientists have been defecting—fleeing to Earth and seeking us out. We believe he’s planning a controlled demolition.”

“What does that mean?” I ask slowly.

“If he can mine enough resources from Earth and then control its destruction, he might be able to prevent the singularity.”

“Might?” Erik says, shaking his head. “Fantastic plan.”

“There has to be a contingency for this,” Dante says, running a hand through his hair.

And then I realize there is.

“Protocol Three.” To my surprise it’s Loricel who speaks.

“What is Protocol Three?” I ask Einstein. He has to know, with his intimate knowledge of the Guild.

“Cormac mentioned it. Well, actually, he sort of threatened it.”

“That does not shock me,” Loricel says. “Protocol Three is the ultimate threat response.”

“Stop speaking in riddles,” Dante demands.

“There are three protocols for dealing with trouble in Arras,” she says.

“Protocol One is alteration,” Erik says. He shrugs at me, mouthing, *Misspent youth*.

“The Guild employs Protocol One to contain information and deal with troubling behavior,” Loricel explains.

“They used it here,” I tell them.

“But the dissent was widespread and Protocol One became ineffective in coping with the situation,” she continues. “Which leads to Protocol Two.”

“They sever an entire sector from Arras,” I say.

“Have you ever wondered why it is the Guild of Twelve Nations?” she asks.

I swallow hard on the question and nod.

“Only four sectors remain of the original twelve,” Loricel says.

“The others were severed?” Jost asks.

“Yes. When a sector became too progressive, it was separated from the whole, or when a disease broke out, or if one wanted its

independence. Protocol Two was how they dealt with these situations," she explains.

"So Arras was larger?" Dante asks.

"It was more divided. Once a separated sector ran out of resources and unraveled, we extended the remaining sectors to take its place."

"And no one noticed?"

"Over time as sectors were detached, we simplified the map and revised history to reflect that there were only four sectors. Because of education control, it was easy for the Guild to ensure the people only knew what they were told."

"But it was happening all around them!" I can't believe this, and yet I know it to be true.

"It's easier to focus on the life around you than to see the whole picture," she says.

"Then what will happen to this sector?" I ask. "What do you mean by 'unraveled'?"

"Extermination?" Jost asks with disgust.

"The disease in the streets only increases the rate of the sector's decay."

"We need to get everyone out of this sector," I say.

"What do you think we've been doing?" Falon asks in an annoyed voice.

"It's been weeks!"

"Do you think you could have done better?" she asks.

"This is getting us nowhere," Dante says. "We're working on a plan, Adelice. We expect to have survivors out within a week."

"What about the sick?" I ask.

"We can't take them," he says.

I can't help but feel disappointed in Dante. He had once set my mother free even though the Guild had turned her into a monster, but now he was turning his back on the people of the Eastern Sector.

"Unfortunately, if what you say is true, the virus progresses so rapidly we have no time to find a cure," Loricel says. "But the diseased represent a clear and immediate threat to our operations here."

"It doesn't sound like we'll be safer on Earth," Erik mutters.

Next to him Jost has gone pale. No doubt he's wondering how to protect Sebrina. I want to kick Erik right now.

"Can we prevent the singularity?" I ask, trying to focus on something positive.

"That is what Protocol Three is for," Loricel explains.

If the first two protocols alter people's psychology and destroy whole metros, I'm not sure I want to know what Protocol Three does.

Albert is the one to finish the explanation. "Protocol Three will end the Cypress Project."

"End it?" I echo. The Cypress Project was once an idea—the theory that with machines men could manipulate the most basic strands of the universe to create a perfect world. Now that idea was Arras itself.

"The men who created it were scientists. It stands to reason we would create a termination procedure if the experiment was deemed a failure," Albert says.

"And Arras is a failure?" I ask, feeling slightly insulted.

"It will be a failure if it results in the death of two worlds."

"But the people in Arras—"

Loricel holds up her hand. "Protocol Three will allow for total evacuation of every metro in Arras before the world unravels."

"And that's it?" I ask. "We press a button and then poof! No more Arras?"

"That oversimplifies things a bit, but—precisely," Albert says.

In a way it's what I wanted, but I've seen Earth and I know the hardships generations will endure rebuilding that world.

"You would let Arras go?" I ask Loricel.

She laughs at this. "I've been trying to let it go for hundreds of years."

I can't help it. I don't want to see Arras destroyed. Does that make me the same as Cormac?

"You spoke to me once of the greater good," I say to her.

"Age understands what youth cannot," she replies, but she offers no other explanation.

"How do we do it?" I ask.

Jax and Albert share a look and my stomach clenches.

"That's the hard part," Albert says.

TWENTY-ONE

ACCORDING TO JAX, WE PRETTY MUCH HAVE to bust into the Guild offices in Cypress, hack their controls, and start evacuation procedures. Which will work—if we don't get caught. Returning to Guild-controlled Arras unnoticed won't be simple, especially if we need to break into the Ministry offices. But then there's still the matter of the self-destruct code—a code only Cormac knows.

Because we wouldn't want this to be too easy.

"I can get it out of him," I say finally.

"I would love to know how you're going to do that," Falon says.

"You have to let me go back. I can claim I was kidnapped and escaped."

"He's not going to believe that," Jost says.

"I don't care if he believes it," I say. "I only need to get close to him."

Cormac might be eager enough to continue the wedding charade to go along with my lie, and I'd only need a little time to get him alone.

"No way." It's Erik who speaks, which surprises me considering the distance he's kept since I arrived. But one look at his face and I know he's serious. I'm not sure how I feel about that.

I open my mouth to argue with him, but Dante raises his hand. "It has been a long day. Adelice should rest. We should all rest."

As soon as he says it, I realize I am tired. More tired than I've been in weeks. I can't quite stifle a yawn.

"We need a plan," Falon says.

"And we can come up with one eight hours from now. But we aren't going to come up with anything if we're tired and arguing," Dante says in a gentle tone.

"I believe you should all spend the evening with those you love," Albert advises. "Our time here is growing short."

I don't want to ask him what he means—whether our time in Arras is growing short, or our time in general.

“I’m going to see to Sebrina.” Jost looks at me and then at his brother. The two share a very serious nod. Have they perfected an entire secret code while we’ve been apart?

“We created some bunkers in abandoned offices. You can sleep there,” Dante says to me.

Dante leads me up a narrow flight of stairs and Erik trails behind us. Dante stops at a door and gives Erik and me an appraising look as he opens it. “I think I’m supposed to give you a lecture or something. As your father.”

“About?” I ask, moving inside the room.

He laughs at me, and it hits me.

“Oh.”

“You two should talk.” Dante turns to leave, looking back once but finally throwing his hands up in the air, and mumbling to himself as he leaves Erik and me alone.

The door shuts too slowly behind him. Erik’s arms are around me immediately, pulling me in to him. The distance I felt before is gone, replaced by urgency.

“I thought—” Then his lips cover mine.

Erik breaks away, his hands cradling my back. “You thought I’d changed my mind?” he guesses.

I nod, suddenly overcome by emotion that creeps hot up my throat, moving toward my eyes. I can’t hold it back and it spills onto my cheeks. Erik brushes away my tears, kissing my cheeks where they fell.

“Never,” he says in a quiet voice. “I was trying to be … professional.”

“Professional? That’s new,” I say a bit too coldly.

“When my brother is around, I don’t want to upset him. He’s lost a lot. I had to focus on helping him rescue Sebrina. I owed him that.”

“You’re being thoughtful,” I realize out loud. Of course our feelings for each other would threaten whatever peace Erik and Jost have found in my absence.

“But I hurt you.” Erik’s hands fall away from me, and I miss his touch immediately.

“No, I understand,” I say, shaking my head as the petty anger I felt minutes before releases me. “I should have known what you were trying to do.”

We linger for a moment in silence, neither of us sure what to say. But I can feel the pulse of my heart throbbing through my blood, stirring me to life, willing me to close the space between us. Erik and I were friends for a long time, but this is new. We're still learning how to be together and what we're willing to share with the rest of the world.

"While they were talking about strategies," Erik says, taking a strand of my hair in his fingers, "I could only think about kissing you."

I try to hold back the smile that jumps to my lips, but I can't, not entirely.

"Unfortunately, the strategy room isn't the place to make up for lost time," he says, a smile curving onto his face.

"We're not there now," I remind him.

He doesn't need any more incentive. The bunker's emergency lights flicker around us and with one smooth motion Erik flips the generator switch, flooding the room in darkness. I can't see him in the blackness, but I sense his presence and I feel his heat radiating as he draws me to him. His lips move along the curve of my jaw and linger at my ear.

"I love you, Adelice," he whispers.

Time slows as his words light upon me, but in my chest something bursts into a million fragments that melt back together instantly, remaking me into someone entirely new.

"I love you, too."

His lips close over mine at the affirmation and we slip into each other. Each of us evolving in the other's arms—a person stronger because of the other, but more vulnerable as well. His fingers grip the hem of my blouse and he pauses.

"Yes," I whisper into his chest even as I find myself in danger of exploding from the sensations crowding my body. He fumbles a little as he finds my buttons, and I laugh.

"I didn't expect you to be nervous." My words are too high-pitched and I realize how anxious I sound, but Erik laughs as well.

"This is a first for me, too."

"Erik," I say softly, and he stops. His face is a sketch against the darkness, the lines of it smooth and fluid, but his eyes are silver as they wait for me to speak. "I'm scared."

His hands cup my face and he gives me a sad smile. I don’t have to tell him what I’m scared of. The war, what will happen next, Amie’s change, Cormac’s descent into madness. And most of all, who I will be after this moment, because this love is fresh and raw. I can already feel its wounds written across my body, singing with the tenderness of newborn skin.

“Don’t be,” he whispers. His hands don’t leave my face. They are warm and steady as he waits. Finally, I pull them down and clasp them into my own. I take a small, but deliberate step backward. And another. And another. Until my calf bumps into the wooden frame of the bunk. I lie down and Erik climbs in beside me. Our bodies press together as he brings his lips to mine.

Erik isn’t aggressive, even if his touch is urgent, and I understand because I’ve been holding this at bay for a long time, too—since that first night in the courtyard when we danced under the moonlight, and I kissed him because he dared to give me hope. Everything fits with him. The way his lips are soft but full on mine. The way my body locks into his. Our first kiss flashes through my mind. The silver moonlight, the trees etching the dark courtyard, dancing without music. But as we find each other now the world lights up around me, haloing Erik in brilliant life, and the music of time weaves around us, filling the air with a gentle, slow harmony that builds toward a soft cadence.

He’s careful and kind, waiting for my cues. My nerves sing out where he touches me, sparking to life, and then his skin is on mine and my body bursts into fire and longing until there’s no space left between us at all.

TWENTY-TWO

I WAKE TANGLED IN ERIK'S ARMS AND peer across to him, my eyes adjusting to the dark, his blond hair a mess across the pillow. I'm torn between pulling the crumpled sheet up over me and waking him up. But while his eyes are closed, I can keep the ache niggling in me at bay, so I watch him sleep and wonder how I'll feel when those blue eyes eventually open. I draw my fingers through my hair to see if it's as untidy as his and then let them trace my own face, feeling for a change. Confusion churns deep inside me. I'm exactly the same, but everything is different.

Slipping from the bed, I wrap the sheet around me and examine myself in the window. Outside the glass, the world is black and my pale silhouette is reflected in it. I let the sheet fall open and study my body. It's still mine. There's no sign of a change, but it's there. I can't see or touch it, but I feel it somewhere, instinctually. Somewhere outside the bunker, a floodlight bursts on, and I back away, catching flashes of a woman in the pane's reflection. It looks like my mother but then I realize it's me. As the light streaks across the room, it slants through the windows and lights silver on Erik's face, causing him to stir. He's beautiful in his sleep, but soon his eyes flutter. The first wave of uncertainty rolls through me, catching my breath. He gets up gracefully, rubbing sleep from his eyes, unaware of the profound shift in the room.

"You are beautiful," he murmurs, reaching to pull me back to him and kissing my neck as I tumble into his arms.

I stare at the window, watching the reflection of two lovers as I try to comprehend the evolution of our relationship—what we've shared. Erik's mirrored eyes meet mine, and he doesn't speak. He doesn't have to—his gaze says it all. In the window, he looks like a man. Lean and tall. The angles of his jaw more defined under a thin layer of stubble. I still look like a girl. Too thin. No curves. But there's something in my face that makes a different case. The couple in the glass share a secret. Will it be obvious to everyone when they see us? Will everyone know?

I don’t have time to decide, because the office door swings open and Jax’s head pops in.

“Knock!” Erik yells at him as I clutch the sheet closer to me.

“Sorry,” Jax says, turning his head away. “But we have a problem. Dante needs you both downstairs now.”

“What’s going on?” I ask, tripping over the sheet to get to my clothes.

“Alixandra is here,” he says.

“What?” I stop scrambling and stare at the back of Jax’s head.

“I’ll explain. Tell them we’re coming.” Erik pushes the door shut.

“Get dressed. I’ll tell you on the way down,” he says, handing me a boot.

“Tell me now.”

“Please,” he says, turning the full force of his blue eyes on me.

I make a face at him, but pull on the boot like he asked.

Before I can open the door, Erik grabs me and pulls me to him. “I have a feeling I won’t have many chances to do this soon.”

His lips press into mine, igniting a fire in my chest. I want to stay here, pressed close to him. When he pulls back, we linger in the moment, looking into each other’s eyes.

“‘Love alters not with his brief hours and weeks, but bears it out even to the edge of doom,’” he whispers, quoting the sonnet we’d read together on Earth. It seems like a lifetime has passed since that night.

“Is that your idea of a pep talk?” I ask.

Erik’s lips curve into an almost-grin. “I just want you to remember that.”

“Always,” I say. He leaves one more soft kiss on my lips, but then we have to go.

In the corridors, people rush past us with bags and folders.

“What’s going on?” I ask Erik with dread.

“Come on.” He grabs my hand and we race back to the strategy room. As soon as we’re through the door, he drops my hand, shooting me an apologetic look. I wink at him.

“Gross,” Falon says.

“Good to see you again.” I smile sweetly at her, but then my gaze lands on the woman behind her.

“What are you doing here?” I demand.

“Nice to see you, too,” Alixandra says. “I’m sorry to interrupt your honeymoon.”

I blush furiously at this but keep myself otherwise composed. “Let’s try this again. What’s stopping me from ripping you in half?”

“Remind me not to save your life in the future.” Alixandra glares back at me.

“Will someone explain what in Arras she’s doing here?”

“I thought you were going to tell her,” Jost says to his brother.

“We were … preoccupied,” Erik says.

Dante covers his eyes and turns away from us. “I don’t need to hear about this.”

“We were talking,” Erik says.

“Is that what they’re calling it these days?” Falon asks.

“You!” Dante points at her. “Cut it out.”

“I was under the impression that there was an emergency,” I remind everyone.

“And you are right, dear girl,” Albert says, shuffling into the room with Jax’s help. I can’t help but notice that Albert is looking worse than yesterday. As though all his stolen years were catching up with him at once. “But young love is equally thrilling, I think.”

Erik’s hand flies to his mouth and I know he’s covering a smirk. I smack him on the shoulder. “Get serious.”

“I guess we know who wears the pants in this relationship,” Alixandra says.

“Why are you my best friend again?” he asks her.

“Wait! Alixandra? Alix?” I can’t control the volume of my voice.

“That took you long enough,” she says.

“But Alix is a boy,” I say, trying to work through this confusing turn of events. “Alix has to be a boy.”

“Why?” Erik asks.

“You g-g-grew up together and Alix w-w-works for the Guild,” I stammer out my answers in spurts of confusion. “What about segregation?”

“All those things are true,” Erik says, “but she’s still a girl.”

“You could have mentioned that,” I say, smacking him again.

“It didn’t occur to me.”

“Thank you. That’s very flattering, Erik,” Alix says.

From his seat, Jost props his feet on the table and watches us with a giant grin.

“You are enjoying this too much,” Erik says.

“Yes, I am,” Jost says, folding his hands behind his head. “I told you, Ad. Saxun doesn’t segregate. I married Rozenn the day she was released from testing.”

“There is an actual emergency,” Dante snaps, pushing Jost’s feet off the table. We all look to Alixandra and she pulls a digifile from her bag.

“Cormac has initiated final termination of this sector,” she says.

“Like, Protocol Three?” I ask.

“Protocol Three allows for evacuation before the sector is destroyed,” Jax says. “This isn’t Protocol Three.”

“But why now?” Erik asks. “He’s already infected half the population, there are no resources left. It’s only a matter of time.”

“He knows we’re here,” I say, looking to Alix for confirmation. She nods.

“He wouldn’t pass up the opportunity to destroy the Agenda,” Dante says in a grim voice.

“Does he know *I’m* here?” I ask, wondering if I can message Cormac. Maybe if he discovers I’m here, he’ll stay his order to terminate the sector.

“He knows,” Alix says. “I bought you as much time as possible before I had to get out myself.”

“I guess the wedding is off,” I say.

“Good. You can get rid of that ring,” Erik says, and I realize I’m still wearing it. I tug it off my finger and throw it across the room.

“What do we do?” I ask Dante, feeling lighter, and ready to take on Cormac.

“We evacuate,” he says.

“But what about the citizens?” I ask. “Not everyone in the Eastern Sector is infected.”

“We don’t have time,” he says.

“Where will we go?” Jost asks. “Back to Earth? It won’t be long before it’s unstable there.”

He has a point. “It won’t do us any good to run,” I say. “If we waste time going back to Earth, Cormac will be more prepared than ever for our return. We have to ensure that the singularity can’t occur.”

“And how will we do that?” Falon asks.

And now I know that I can never save both worlds. I have to make a choice. This is what being the Whorl is truly about. I can’t hold both worlds together any longer, not as this one spins further out of my control.

“We have to initiate Protocol Three,” I say in a soft voice.

No one speaks for a moment, each of them digesting this idea while in the same instant realizing I’m admitting defeat. For those of us who have lived most of our lives in Arras it feels unbearable, but I take solace in the promise of Earth. If we can initiate Protocol Three and evacuate the citizens of Arras before this world begins to self-destruct, we can rebuild the planet we left behind.

“Don’t we have to get into the Northern Sector to do that?” Erik asks.

“I hate to interrupt, especially with bad news,” Alix says, waving her digifile. “I know you don’t have time to read this report, but Cormac has blocked communication between all sectors.”

“Even if we initiate Protocol Three—” Dante begins.

“The evacuation calls won’t go out,” Alix confirms.

“Then we have to find a way to evacuate the population.”

“It’s too late—” Falon is cut off by the entrance of Loricel.

“Cormac can’t be trusted. I’ve known him for hundreds of years, but his behavior shows signs of madness,” Loricel states in an imperial voice.

“He has to be stopped,” I say. “We can’t go back to Earth and come up with another plan. We can’t let him continue.”

“I agree,” Albert says, and everyone turns to him. “I created this world to put an end to violence, and while I struggle to see it come to violence now, I can’t deny that Cormac Patton has become a threat to the very existence of the human race.”

“So we agree,” Erik says, “but I’m still not sure how we’re even going to get into the Northern Sector.”

“Leave that to me,” Loricel says. “I got Adelice out. I can get you in.”

“We can’t all go,” I say.

“She’s right,” Dante agrees. “We need a group to get the word out to the resistance leaders in the other sectors about what’s happening. The ministers can initiate the evacuation procedures. All the protocols are in place for the ministers to open loopholes throughout Arras.”

“What about the people here?” Jost asks, and I know he’s thinking of Sebrina.

“A group needs to stay and get everyone out. If we send someone through the loophole, we can get the rest of the survivors evacuated in minutes,” Albert suggests.

“Are you sure?” I ask.

“I’ll make sure,” Erik says, stepping in. Our eyes meet and we both know that our talents are needed in too many places at once to allow us to go together now.

“But the second they rebound into the other sectors, their personal identifying sequences will be flagged,” Falon points out. “They’ll have you ripped in minutes.”

“We’ll use a veil,” Loricel says. “The veils will mask your personal identifying sequences. We might as well use the talents of the Tailors in the room.”

“I don’t have the materials to make a veil,” Erik says.

“You have me,” Loricel reminds him.

“How long do we have?” Dante asks Alix.

“About an hour,” she says.

“Arras time or Earth time?” Jost asks.

“That’s relative,” Albert says.

“What does that mean?” Jost demands.

“It means that in this set of circumstances, we have an hour. We’d better get to it.”

Everyone rushes in opposite directions, and I don’t have time to say goodbye to Erik before Dante has pulled me to the side. We’re leaving with Jax and Falon.

“That’s it?” I ask. “How are we going to do this with only four of us?”

“Jax will stay with you the whole time, Adelice,” Dante says.

“I’m not much of a bodyguard,” Jax points out.

“You know how to initiate Protocol Three and Adelice claims she can get Cormac to tell her the pass code,” Falon says.

“That was before I knew he’d ordered my death,” I point out.

“Be extra sweet,” Dante advises me.

“And the other sectors?” I ask, ignoring Dante’s helpful advice.

“We will have several minutes in each sector before the coventries detect an anomaly,” Loricel says. “You must get word out before I start the next rebound.”

“We should go alone. Cover more territory,” Dante says.

“I can handle two of you at a time, but past that, things will get tricky.”

“I’ll go to the Western Coventry,” I volunteer. “Pryana will help me get the evacuations going, and I have to be sure that Amie gets out.”

“We need to focus on the population, not the coventries,” Dante argues.

“I’m not negotiating on this,” I tell him. “I need to make sure Amie gets out, and Pryana is Agenda. She can notify others.”

“Amie will be safe, Ad,” Jax says.

“If the evacuation measures are in place,” I say. “There are four of us. We can cover all the sectors and the Western Coventry, too.”

“Fine,” Dante relents. “Loricel, can you do it?”

“Absolutely,” Loricel says.

Dante nods, his eyes flicking to each of us as if to gauge our readiness.

“Then Falon will take the leader of the Southern Sector, Jax the Northern, and I’ll take the Western Sector, and then we’ll all meet in the Northern Ministry to deal with Cormac together.”

I nod, my pulse building to a frenzy. From this moment on we are on borrowed time, but before I can even consider how much danger we’re rebounding into, Erik appears.

“I hear you need disguises.”

TWENTY-THREE

I ALWAYS EXPECTED THAT HAVING MY FLESH altered would hurt, but other than an initial prickle across my nerves, I don't feel much.

"How are you doing?" Erik asks me.

I don't bother to look at him, because then I'll see what he's doing and I definitely don't want to see.

"I'm great," I say as enthusiastically as possible. "I'm still not sure what you're doing, though." I never mastered my Tailor abilities past basic alteration, and my work was overseen by Dante or Erik every time. This is well beyond the scope of my skill.

He snorts, but I'm telling him the truth—it doesn't hurt. "Veiling creates an alternate pattern of information in a person's personal identifying sequence. If you tried to go back in without it, it would only be seconds before a security alert was activated. One of the many unfortunate side effects of having total control over an artificial world is how easily anyone can be found."

As a child this information made me feel safe. Now that I'm the person being hunted, I can see the problem with this setup.

"But one of the perks," he adds, "is that what they see on the security looms can be manipulated."

"And what they see in person?"

"That doesn't change, and unfortunately, I don't have time to alter your appearance. Not that I want to," he adds.

"So this isn't an actual disguise?"

"Only for the security looms."

"Shoot," I say, trying to lighten the mood. "I was hoping to get rid of these freckles. I guess I'll have to settle for some funny spectacles or a big hat."

"I love those freckles." Erik leans in and brushes a quick kiss over my bare shoulder, straightening up again when Jax turns back toward us.

"How long does veiling buy us?" I ask.

“Depends.” Jax sounds skittish and when I look at him, his skin is gray. It could be the lighting, but I tend to think he’s actually getting sick.

“You okay?”

He gestures to my arm, and without thinking I look down at it. Erik’s fingers are in my flesh. There’s surprisingly little blood, but I suppose there’s not been much blood any of the times I’ve witnessed alteration. Still, it’s unsettling to see his fingers inside my arm, with my skin draped open like loose fabric.

“That’s appetizing,” I say.

“To answer your question,” Jax says, tapping his foot in a nervous beat on the floor, “when we enter, we won’t be flagged automatically because of the veil over our personal identifying sequence. But eventually they’ll realize that there are unidentified sequences in the patterns of the sectors.”

Dante reappears, chewing on some rations. I don’t know how he can eat. “That’s why we need to get in and out of the other sectors and then into the Cypress offices before they catch on,” Dante says.

“We could have minutes or hours,” Jax says with a shrug.

“I will be moving you within five minutes of the first rebound,” Loricel informs us.

“That won’t be enough time! What if we can’t find anyone?” I ask.

“We don’t have long before the destruction of the Eastern Sector,” she reminds me. “I can work quickly, but I won’t have a place to work for much longer.”

“Wait. If you’re staying here,” I say slowly, piecing together what she’s telling me, “then you won’t make it out.”

“Probably not,” she says, but she doesn’t seem upset.

“You’ll die.”

“I know that,” Loricel says. “Don’t be sad for me, Adelice. I’ve had more than enough time to come to grips with the inevitability of my death. Too long, actually.”

“But …” I know she’s right, but the thought of Loricel staying here to die while helping us escape makes me sick.

“I won’t be alone,” she says softly.

“Who?” I ask.

But then I spot Albert lingering in the corner behind her. She winks at me and I have to suppress a laugh. I'm still sad but if the two wisest people I know want this to happen, then I have to believe they're right.

"What happens when we get in there?" I ask Jax.

"Once we breach the Ministry in Cypress, I'll access the system and begin Protocol Three."

"But what about the pass code?" I ask.

"You get Cormac to fess up," Falon says, folding her arms over her chest. She clearly doesn't think I can do it, which makes me want to hand deliver it to her.

"Once the protocol has been initiated, the system will begin the self-destruct process as soon as Cormac says the pass code," Jax says.

"I only have to get him to say it?" I say. "That shouldn't be … too hard."

"Yes, but he has to be the one to say it. It's voice-encoded," Dante says. "It won't work unless it's him saying it."

"Okay," I say slowly. It won't be as simple as raiding his office if Cormac fails to comply. "What if he's not there?"

Dante exhales heavily. "We have to assume he is. He gave the order to destroy this sector from his office."

"I don't like the idea of Adelice running around risking her life if we aren't sure Cormac is there," Erik says. He's finished with my arm and he squeezes my hand before he starts on Jax.

"It's a suicide mission any way we go about it," Falon says. She sounds like this barely bothers her. "You two need to say goodbye now."

I know I'll probably never see Erik again. I know I'll probably die today, but I don't need Falon to point that out at this moment.

"Falon," Dante says in a low voice. It's meant to be a warning but she rolls her eyes.

"What good does it do to lie to them or give them false hope? Let them have a minute alone."

"There's no time for that," he says.

"There's never any time for that," she says. She turns on her heel and walks out of the room and that's when I realize what's bothering her. She isn't as doom-and-gloom as she pretends to be. She's angry with Dante,

because it’s too late for them. They’ve spent too long fighting instead of taking a moment to be together.

“You know,” I whisper to Dante, “she’s in love with you.”

“Falon?”

“You didn’t realize that?” Erik asks.

“I don’t assume everyone is in love with me,” Dante retorts, but his eyes dart toward the door.

“Go on, idiot,” I say, and Dante rushes out of the room.

We have minutes left to live a lifetime. We should make every second count.

TWENTY-FOUR

WE HAVE TO LEAVE TO MAKE THE rebound into the various sectors as quickly as possible, but Erik catches my arm and pulls me into a dark hallway, away from the people rushing to make the final arrangements.

“I have to go and get these people out of this sector before Cormac terminates it,” he says.

There are tears pooling in my eyes, but I blink them away.

“This is not goodbye, Ad.” He cradles my chin and forces me to look him in the eyes.

“You don’t know that,” I say.

This was a possibility. But now that we’re facing it I can’t quite catch my breath. The more I look at Erik, the more scared I become. What are the chances that we’ll both come back from this? I only got him back yesterday and now I’m losing him again.

I run my fingers along the faint scar where he applied my veil. “‘Love is not love which alters when it alteration finds,’” I murmur faintly, recalling his favorite sonnet. “I love you.”

“I love you,” he says with a smile, “‘even to the edge of doom.’”

He kisses me goodbye then and I melt into him, wishing for one more night or even a few minutes more, but it’s over before it begins.

An uncomfortable cough startles us apart and we look up to see Jost standing in the shadows, his thumbs hooked in the pockets of his jeans.

“I’m sorry. I don’t mean to interrupt,” he says.

“We were … done,” Erik says, dropping his hands from me.

“Stop that,” Jost says.

“What?” Erik and I ask at the same time.

“Pretending like you aren’t in love,” he says. “It doesn’t bother me.”

How can that be possible when it bothers Erik and me so much?

“I’m sorry,” Erik says.

“Don’t be. Love is one thing no one should ever be angry over,” he says. “And without you two I wouldn’t have Sebrina now. Thank you for that.”

Embarrassed, I murmur, “You’re welcome.”

“You don’t have to thank us,” Erik says with a shake of his head. “You would have done the same for either of us.” I realize he’s right. Somehow, in the insanity of our time together, I managed to find a family, crazy and mixed up as it is. This is my family.

“I need you to promise me something.” Jost pauses, searching for the right words. “If anything happens to me, please take care of Sebrina.”

“You don’t have to ask that—” I begin.

“No, I do. Not because I don’t trust you, but because I need to know that if anything happens to me, Sebrina will be safe with you.”

“You’re coming back,” Erik says in a firm voice. “That little girl won’t lose another father. I swear on my own life.”

“I see you’re going to be a protective uncle.” Jost’s voice breaks as he speaks. He tries to cover it with a laugh.

“You’re our family,” I say, and Erik’s arm slides around my waist. “She’s our family, too.”

Jost gives me a genuine smile this time. Not the wicked grin he shares with his brother. This smile is warm and full of hope and it goes all the way to his eyes.

“Come here,” Erik says, waving his brother toward us.

He wraps an arm around each of us and we embrace, knowing this is probably the last time we’ll ever do so. I only know one thing: one of us has to survive for Sebrina.

“If I don’t make it—” I begin, but Erik shushes me. He seems incapable of accepting this possibility.

“No, please listen,” I continue. “Find Amie. She can take care of herself, but she’ll have questions. I need her to know why I did what I did.”

“She knows you’re a good person,” Erik says.

“Am I?” I ask.

“Yes,” both Erik and Jost say at the same time, and for the first time in a long time I believe it.

One of us has to live. To tell our story. To write it down. We’re the closest to the action of this tragedy—if it’s even a tragedy. I don’t think it is anymore. I think it’s a story of hope, unlikely as I once thought that was.

“I’ll leave you two alone,” Jost says, pushing Erik’s arm toward me.

But before we can linger in our goodbye, Dante appears, yelling for us to get going.

In the end, no more words pass between Erik and me. There is no final kiss. Only a look, worth more than any whispered farewell.

*

Loricel has set up in the makeshift rebound room they brought me through when I arrived. There’s a wide loom in front of her, larger than most I saw at the Coventry, including her personal loom in the high tower. It sits empty and I wish I could see the weave of Arras one more time, before it’s too late. I know it’s too dangerous to pull it up before we go, but there’s an ache building slowly in me at the thought of never touching the precise, wondrous strands on a loom again.

“How are you going to do this?” I ask her, staring at the instrument panel.

“It will be like when you rebounded through the various stations,” she says, adjusting gears in preparation.

“But that took an hour.”

“Because less talented people were at the looms and they had to wait for bureaucrats to tell them it was okay to start the process. Then, they were watched the whole time—”

“Okay.” I surrender. “I get it.”

“You’re in good hands,” she says.

“I wouldn’t trust anyone else to do this,” I say.

“That’s a shame,” Loricel says. “You must learn to open your heart again, Adelice.”

I think of Erik and Jost. I think of the little girl who might be dependent on me one day, and of my own sister. “I do trust people,” I say.

“I made you believe once that love is a liability.” Her eyes flicker to Albert.

“It is,” I say softly. I feel like half of myself is outside this room, going off on a dangerous mission I can’t control. I don’t allow myself to think about it for long because the tears creep up my throat, shredding my will to do this. But even as the fear grows in me, there is certainty.

This is the right thing to do. Erik and I both know that. We wouldn't be able to live with ourselves if we didn't try.

"Perhaps," she says, "but love also gives us the strength that we never knew we had."

"I'm glad you'll be together," I tell her, looking over at Albert. "I wish you had longer."

"Who can count the minutes she spends with the person she loves and not feel lucky?" she asks.

It's easier to say that, knowing she'll be with her love at the very end. Erik and I … I don't want to think about. "I want one more minute."

"You have it," she says firmly.

"How can you know that?" I ask.

"I know," she says. "Look closely."

Before I can ask her what this means, Albert's hand settles on my shoulder. "A final word?"

I nod, eyes stinging from the goodbyes. He leads me to a quiet corner and waits for me to speak. "I still have questions."

"And we have run out of time for answers. That is a sad fact about life, Miss Lewys. If you'll pardon the double entendre, not everything can be tied up in a neat bow." His soft eyes sink under the weight of his years.

"Why does everyone believe I'm the Whorl?" I ask. "Because I can weave *and* alter?"

"It's not your skills that make you special, it's that you chose to fight. The Kairos Agenda called you the Whorl because they needed someone to believe in. All rebellions have men of words, few have men of action," he says as his lips curve into a small smile.

"But they believe I was destined for this."

"You know better," he says. "We make our own destinies. Never forget that." My mouth opens, but the questions die on my lips, because I'm pulled away from him and into the chair we're using for the rebound.

This is unlike the other rebounds I've experienced. This time the bottom drops out from under me and the room shifts so quickly that my stomach flips, as though I'm falling. My hands fly to my sides as if my body is out of balance. They meet only with air. The world around me is a riot of color and sound. A clash of metallic strings shrieks through the

space about me as though time is moving too quickly, throwing reality out of joint.

And then I find myself in the vermilion corridor of the high tower where I once lived. I race forward and knock on a door. No one answers and I rush to the stairs. I don't have time to wait for the ancient brass elevator.

I burst through the exit on the next floor and into the lounge of the high tower. I skid on its marble floors, nearly tripping over a leather wingback. At the same moment, the elevator doors *ding* and slide open to reveal Pryana. Her eyes widen at the sight of me.

"Adelice?"

"Where's Amie?" I pant the question.

"In her room. It's in the lower tower," she says. "I can take you there."

"There's no time!" I cry. "You have to initiate evacuation procedures. Contact the Agenda. Everyone needs to get out of Arras now!"

"What?" Pryana asks.

"You have to get the citizens out and to the surface," I say, "or everyone will die. Please. You have to get Amie out."

Her eyebrows knit together. "I don't understand. I haven't received any intelligence that Cormac is taking action."

This stops me cold. If the information had filtered to Alix, how hadn't it reached other members of the Agenda?

"Adelice, who told you—" She cuts off as a figure sweeps into the room.

The woman's eyes widen even as her mouth curls to reveal a toothy smile. Another Spinster might be surprised to see me, but Maela only looks delighted.

"As I suspected." She speaks in a low hiss, her words full of the venom she's stored up toward us.

I step forward, my fingers tingling at my side, as I plan my next move. All of Maela's weaknesses are psychological. I don't have to raise a hand to her when I can destroy her with a word. But before I can find the correct one, my body trembles and my stomach drops. Loricel is moving me again.

I lunge forward, hoping to grab Maela and drag her along on the rebound. She can't prevent Pryana from warning the Coventry. I won't let

her. Pryana steps in front of me, her fingers squeezed into tight balls.

“Let me—” I start.

“I’ll finish her,” Pryana promises me as Maela’s head falls back in laughter. The sound races through my body and I try to push past Pryana as the world sparks and cracks around me. I’m moving again, and my last glimpse of the Western Coventry is Pryana charging toward Maela. If she wins, there’s hope for the Coventry, but if not, there’s no promise of help for my sister.

This time I land in a crumple next to Dante.

“That’s why we sit down,” Dante grumbles, getting to his feet and brushing off his pants.

“Are we in?” I ask him. I spring to my feet.

“I think so,” he says, pivoting to check out our surroundings.

“Wait,” I say, “this is it. I was here a few weeks ago. But where are the others?”

“I’m sure Loricel can only move so many of us at once,” he says, but his eyes dart around as we wait for Jax and Falon to join us.

After a moment, a figure rips into the room, crashing onto the floor. Jax rolls over with a groan. “That was not pleasant.”

We wait a few more minutes before I start to realize no one else is coming. “Dante,” I say softly, “Falon will chew you out if she shows up and we’re waiting around.”

Jax takes my lead. “Yeah, man. We can’t wait.”

“You’re right,” Dante says, but his eyes never meet mine. He keeps searching the air, waiting for her to appear.

Jax distributes a number of devices that look like digifiles to me, but they’re smaller.

“What are these?” I ask him.

“PTDs. Portable telecommunications devices,” he says.

“Like a walking companel?” I ask.

“It’s more like a complant, but I don’t have to embed this one in your brain. They’re given to lower-level officers in the Guild. We’ll be able to communicate with one another through them,” he explains. “But if you get caught, smash it.”

“Smash it?”

“Heel of boot and floor,” he says. “Otherwise it will lead security straight to the other two … three of us.”

If Falon joins us. There’s still no sign of her.

“What first?” I ask.

“I need to get to the mainframe and dive in while you get Cormac to say that pass code.”

“How will we know when you’ve initiated the protocol?” Dante asks.

“You’ll know,” he says. “This whole building is wired to alert everyone of the impending protocol.”

“Are you telling me an alarm will go off?” I ask.

“Yes,” he says with a sheepish grin.

“There goes our low profile,” I say with a grimace. Now that we’re here, my bravado is evaporating quickly. I might have been able to guess Cormac’s code or find it somewhere in his office. I already knew all his favorite things—cigar boxes and decanters. If it were hidden somewhere, I could find it. But talking it out of him was another story, especially if I would have to wait for an alarm to signal me that it was time for him to say it.

“Nothing about this mission was going to stay secret for long,” Dante reminds me. We race through the halls, following the blueprints Jax has uploaded to his digifile.

“I’m down here,” Jax says, motioning to a door on his right.

“Good luck,” I say, and without thinking I lunge forward and hug him.

“No time for that,” Dante says, but the two shake hands with a meaningful nod to each other.

“Cormac’s office is on the third floor,” Jax says.

“I know.” Despite my claim that I can get Cormac to talk, as we maneuver the halls of the Ministry dread builds in me, overflowing into a frantic energy that spills through my body. It’s quiet here, so quiet our footsteps echo off the white tiled floors. Every door we pass is shut, and we haven’t encountered a soul yet.

“You okay?” Dante asks.

I nod, but I can’t hide the tremors rolling through my body. Everything depends on getting Cormac to do one thing for me. And Cormac has never done anything for me before. I don’t know why I

expect he will now. As we round the corridor that leads directly to Cormac's office, a pair of thick hands grab me from behind.

"Look what I found," a gruff voice teases in my ear. Hannox. Of course. I kick back against my captor, but between being out of breath from running and a little wobbly from the rebound, my feet meet with air. And the man laughs.

"Cormac is expecting you," Hannox says. He pushes me forward and I stumble up on my feet.

"I wouldn't drop by unannounced," I say, trying to keep the situation light even though my pulse is racing. I glance around, finally catching sight of Dante. He's been pinned by another security guard, who's holding a gun to Dante's head.

"Yet you're using a veil," Hannox says.

I bite my lip and stare him down. I have no idea how he can guess that.

"We found your friend. She put up quite the fight," Hannox says. "It shouldn't be long until they've locked in on all the veiled sequences in the pattern."

"What did you do to her?" Dante demands. Another guard is holding him steady, his arms locked behind his back.

"What we do to traitors," Hannox spits back at him. He gets up next to Dante's face. "We ripped that little girl. And now we'll rip her, too." He jerks a thumb at me.

Dante's jaw tenses, but before I can say anything to distract him, he smashes his forehead into Hannox's nose, sending a fountain of blood spurting into the air and the guard fumbling to control his gun.

"You bastard," Hannox says, grabbing his nose. His hand flies up.

"Stop!" Cormac commands. "This is no way to treat our guests."

"He broke my bloody nose," Hannox shrieks.

"Thanks for the status update," Cormac says. "Bring them into my office."

Hannox grabs me roughly and drags me toward the open door at the end of the hall. I consider the injuries I could inflict on him and for a moment my fingers itch and tingle, urging me to attack. But if I unwind Cormac's right-hand man, I'll never get Cormac to give me the pass code.

So I let them lead me down the narrow corridor and into the den of my enemy.

TWENTY-FIVE

"I'M SURPRISED TO SEE YOU CAN CONTROL yourself," Cormac says to me when Hannox shoves me into his office. Hannox and his men force us into chairs and tie our hands behind our backs. I don't even struggle. All I need is for Cormac to talk, and maybe he will if he thinks I'm incapacitated. Cormac shares a few quiet words with his right-hand man as one of the officers finishes tying us to our chairs. Hannox casts one long look at me before he orders his men to follow him out of the room.

We have Cormac alone. This should feel like a victory.

"I didn't try to escape this time," I remind him now that Hannox is gone. "I was taken."

"And yet I notice you aren't wearing my ring," he snarls. "And there is a glow about you. Spending time with young Erik? Or is it Jost? I can't keep up with you."

"We took Adelice," Dante says. "She convinced us to bring her back."

"Sell your lies elsewhere," Cormac says, tugging at his bow tie. "I was heartbroken to learn young Alixandra is a traitor. I can't wait to get my hands on her—now that I'm through with her."

Through with her? I glance at Dante to see if he caught it, but his eyes are distant. Plotting.

"You came in veiled after rebounding into every remaining sector in Arras," Cormac continues. "You have someone very talented working with your group."

I keep my face stony. I'm not sure what harm it would do to admit Cormac is right, but I also know he hoards information, keeping it to twist for his own purposes later.

"Tell Loricel I said hello," Cormac says. "Unless …" He leaves the unspoken words in the air, niggling at me like an itch.

"Unless?" I can't help prompting him.

"Unless you came from the Eastern Sector."

"And if we did?" Dante asks.

"Then I'll be offering condolences soon."

I bite back a cocky smile. Cormac doesn't know that we know about his plan. He doesn't know that there was time to evacuate.

"Don't hide your smile, Adelice. I've always loved that *smug* grin," Cormac says. He strides over to his desk and pours himself a drink. "I especially love the moments when I get to wipe it off your *smug* face."

"Not this time, Cormac," I say.

"Do you think I didn't know Alixandra was going to betray me?" he asks.

He succeeds at wiping the amusement from me.

"You didn't set the Eastern Sector to self-destruct," I say in a flat voice.

"Of course not," Cormac says, "but by now your people will have herded themselves into a nice flock of sheep ready for the slaughter."

Erik. Jost. Sebrina. The list of people currently evacuating flashes through my mind. "Don't. I will do anything you want."

"But you've already done everything I wanted," Cormac says. "You rid me of a troublesome sector, put the rest of Arras into a panic, and managed to hand deliver the leaders of the Kairos Agenda. Do you think citizens will listen to strangers screaming that the sky is falling? Arras will look to me now and I am more prepared than anyone expected for the tragic events of today."

"You never wanted to marry me," I realize.

"Now you're catching on."

I wasn't a distraction for the citizens of Arras, I was a distraction for the Kairos Agenda. Because of me they walked right into Cormac's trap in the Eastern Sector. But worst of all, I'd been so caught up in guessing Cormac's next move in our staged plan, I never saw any of this coming.

"Pryana? Alix? You knew they were Agenda," I guess.

Cormac's lips curls as he nods. "I figured it out. They both proved quite useful. They were too busy thinking they were clever—"

"To realize you were feeding them information," I finish for him. That's why Pryana hadn't heard anything about Cormac's order. He had purposefully slipped the information to Alix, knowing she would pass it on to the rest of us.

"It was simple. Feed one rebel rotten information and she'll poison the rest of the group. Watch the lie spread and ferret out the traitors. Soon

there will be no more Agenda infestation."

"And now the whole of Arras will believe you're their hero," Dante says. "Because there will be no one to tell them any differently."

"You've done a good job cementing yourself in the minds of the people of Arras," Cormac says to me. "When I share my heartbreak over your rebellion, they will feel the outrage that only betrayal can cultivate."

"And who will keep your looms running?" I ask. "What will you do when the Earth fails to produce your precious raw materials?"

"Once we remove the threat left below there, I won't have to worry about the interference of scum like you."

"And what if there's a singularity?" I challenge.

"That's a theory," Cormac says with a wave of his hand. "My men don't believe it's a threat."

"Albert does," I say in a low voice. "Keep harvesting and you'll destroy Earth *and* Arras."

"Aren't we taking our Whorl role a little too seriously?" His lips press into a thin smile. "There's no Whorl. It's only a legend passed between desperate men."

Nothing about Cormac's dismissal of me or the Agenda stings, because he fails to understand. Even now, I'm only beginning to comprehend it myself. "Those desperate men are your people, and they believe their *legend*."

"What good is belief? Perhaps saying that you believe in something helps you sleep at night, but you and I both know there is no power in that."

"It's not just the belief," I say as a sense of purpose plants itself in my brain, growing roots that lodge within my soul. "It's the possibility, and once people see what is possible, even in one tiny, insignificant moment, they're capable of imagining more. There is power in imagination. Undeniable, unpredictable, uncontrollable power. You're right. The Whorl might be nothing more than a dream, but the idea has given people the ability to dream again. You won't find it easy to control them now."

Cormac's jaw tightens, but there's no trace of anger or annoyance or even amusement. He's calling my bluff.

"But you already know that," I continue. "Girls and boys deciding not to marry. Spinsters refusing to stay at their looms. What will you do

when all the Spinsters begin to dream?”

But he only smirks. “Every society must evolve.”

He raises his fingers and trails them through an invisible pattern in the air. After a moment, a crack in the fabric of the room appears.

“What did you do?” I ask in a breathless voice.

“There are those who said men shouldn’t have this power, but I disagree,” Cormac says. “Not just *any* man should have this power. But I am not *just any man.*”

“You’ve been altering yourself,” I realize aloud. His erratic behavior. The scar I glimpsed. It makes sense.

“Isn’t that why you kicked Kincaid out? For perverting the research behind the Cypress Project?” Dante asks. “Or did you kick him out to steal his idea?”

“Kincaid was a fool. He was always too busy showing off to consider what the people around him needed.”

“Does that sound like anyone we know?” I ask in mock innocence.

“It takes one to know one,” Cormac points out.

He might have a point. Even now I’m too busy showing off and talking back to consider what I need to do in order to ensure that the others survive this.

“So you’re a Spinster—or are you a Tailor?” I ask. I pull against the rope binding my hands. I wasn’t scared to be in the same room with him before. Now I am.

“I’m a thinker. A Tailor. A Spinster. A spy,” he says. “But most important, I’m a Creweler.”

“I don’t believe you,” I say, because I need it to be false. I need to believe he doesn’t have these abilities.

“Oh, rest assured, Adelice. Thanks to your measurements, our scientists have been able to synthesize a genetic compound that has given me the same set of skills you possess.”

I stare at him, trying to wrap my head around this. The thing is, it’s not simply that Cormac has been altered to have these abilities. They’ve been synthesized, like in the earliest experiments with the serums on Earth. Experiments that had gone horribly wrong. The fact is, Cormac is a merely a test case, which explains the unpredictability of his behavior and his erratic attitude in the past few weeks.

“I thought you seemed off,” I say to him. “I wrote it off as stress, but it seems it was more than that. You’ve been running your own personal Cypress Project all along.”

Cormac hadn’t been losing his mind. He’d been warping it, pushing his own genetic abilities to the brink.

“I don’t need your condescension, Adelice,” Cormac says. “Nor do I appreciate it.”

“You’re insane,” Dante says. “Can you appreciate that?”

“I’m powerful,” Cormac says. “If I were insane I wouldn’t be nearly as successful as I am.”

“You have an entire world living a lie—”

“That they’re eager to believe,” Cormac interrupts me.

“You think lies are that easy to swallow?” I ask. “Arras knows you’re full of it, Cormac, and soon they’ll have proof.”

“And who is going to show them?” he asks. “You?”

“Believe me, I’m up for the challenge.”

Before he can retort, a shrill siren sounds. Jax has managed to trip the protocols and set off the evacuation alert. Now we merely need Cormac to say the pass code and Protocol Three will be initiated.

That shouldn’t be hard, given his god complex.

“I see you didn’t come alone,” Cormac says. “What were you saying about wanting to come back and make things work?”

“I have no idea what’s going on,” I say, keeping my face blank. In truth, I don’t know where Jax is.

Cormac holds up the PTD that Jax gave us to communicate and waves it at me. “Who’s at the other end of this?” he asks.

“No one you know,” I say.

“Not my dear Erik then? Pity. I would love to rip that nuisance right out of Arras. But it is someone you know, Adelice. You pulled a little trick once at the Coventry,” Cormac says, “and I’ve often thought of it. You disregarded proximity standards. Do you remember?”

I know what he’s talking about. I had called up the repository in Loricel’s room and rewoven it into the strange screens in her studio, so that I could enter it and search for information about my sister. Because I was manipulating the space around me, I risked the integrity of the Coventry’s weave. It shouldn’t have been possible for me to do it, and it

probably wouldn’t have been if I had been using any loom other than Loricel’s. Still, the loom had warned me by issuing a proximity alert. I have no idea what that has to do with the PTD that connects me to Jax, though.

“I’ve had them install a toy in my office,” Cormac says. He presses a button, opening a hidden panel in his wall to reveal a gleaming new loom.

“That’s your problem, Cormac,” I say. “A loom isn’t a toy. Arras is doomed if you think it is. You can’t even access it within the boundaries of Arras.” Now I know why he mentioned the proximity alert. It isn’t safe to weave and do Crewel work within Arras. That’s why the coventries exist between Earth and Arras—as a safety measure. And Cormac is disregarding that. I’ve spent too much time laughing off his drinking to realize his real addiction is power.

“Let’s see what we can do with it anyway,” he says.

He presses a series of buttons on the side of the loom and it whirrs to life. I strain against my bindings, trying to get a better view of the loom.

“You know how dangerous that is?” I ask in a quiet voice. “You’ve made your point.”

“No, I have not,” he screams, moving back toward me and getting in my face. “Because you still don’t respect me. You don’t fear me.”

“That’s what this is about?” I ask. “You want me to fear you? Well, you’ve got what you wanted. Seeing you playing with that loom with no regard for its power or the consequences of your actions frightens me, Cormac. And if you were sane, it would frighten you, too.”

He’s not the Cormac who picked me up on my retrieval night. That Cormac did what he thought was right for the greater good, even if his perception of what was best was warped. He’s incapable of logic or consideration. He can’t see anything but shades of gray.

And that makes him a danger to everyone.

Before I can react, a piece of the weave appears on the loom. In comparison to the protocol sirens blaring through the room, the blinking red proximity alert seems weak and inconsequential. But that doesn’t mean it’s not more dangerous.

“I’ve pulled the weave of this room onto the loom,” he says with a smile.

And there it is. We're laid out in front of him and all it would take to destroy us is one careful sweep, if he has the talent for it. Could he have had that spliced into him or is he too arrogant to see he lacks it?

Without precision, he'll just take out the entire room. That would end the threat of Cormac, but it wouldn't solve our bigger problem. Arras is full of men too old and too set in their ways to change course. Another corrupt leader will simply rise in Cormac's place—and another and another. Perhaps it won't be any different on Earth if we evacuate, but at least we won't face the possibility of a singularity that could wipe humankind from existence.

Cormac picks up the PTD Jax gave me and presses the com button.

"You guys okay?" Jax's voice crackles over the speaker, and my heart sinks.

"It's a trap!" I yell, but it's too late. Cormac already knows where he is—now he wants to play with his prey.

"Adelice and I were visiting," Cormac says into the PTD. "You've been a busy bee."

"It's too late," Jax says. "I've locked the evacuation protocol and reopened communication channels between sectors. They know what you've done."

"Do you think they'll take the word of a rebel?" Cormac asks, practically screaming into the PTD.

"They won't have to," he says. "Loricel sent the communiqué."

Cormac curses into the PTD and drops it onto the floor. "Screen," he barks.

A wall screen bursts to life over us.

"I want you to see this," he seethes. "I don't know who your friend is. He must be quite bright to have breached our entire system."

"He is," I say, "and he's a better man than you."

"How touching," Cormac says. He barks a coordinate to the screen and the security stream for that section of the guild offices projects above us. Jax is moving quickly, checking over his shoulder. I want to yell at him, but I know it doesn't matter. He can't hear me, and even if he could it wouldn't matter anyway. Cormac knows where he is. Cormac has a loom.

Cormac can weave, which means Cormac can rip.

My stomach turns over and shoots bile into my throat, but I swallow it down as Cormac returns to the loom and hesitates for a moment, staring at the brilliant tapestry laid before him.

“What’s he looking at?” Dante asks. “It’s a tangled mess.”

I’m somewhat surprised Dante can’t see it clearly for himself, but the minute differences between a Spinster and a Tailor have always surprised me. “It’s here,” I say, “he has this building on the loom.”

Dante’s eyes fly to the screen and he struggles against the rope binding him to the chair. Jax is his best friend and he can do nothing to warn him.

“You don’t have to do this,” I say to Cormac. “Everyone in Arras is evacuating. Come with us. Start over on Earth.”

He ignores me, turning a gear to zoom in on the image.

“Go home,” I add softly.

“I have no home,” Cormac says, turning his attention from the loom for a moment and buying Jax a few more precious seconds. “You’ve destroyed it.”

“Arras was never a home,” I say. “It was a lie. It’s time to let it go. What’s the pass code for Protocol Three?”

“So that’s why you’ve come,” he says with a laugh. “So that Cormac Patton can betray Arras.”

“No, I came to give you a chance at redemption,” I say. “If Arras isn’t unraveled, both worlds will be erased from existence. You have the power to stop it. You can be the hero.”

“It’s too late for redemption, and I don’t have anyone to redeem myself to,” he says, and then he turns back to the loom and, with the confidence of a well-practiced Spinster, plucks a single thread. It pulls out slowly and over us Jax is frozen in place, disappearing limb by limb, slowly being wiped from existence.

“Stop!” Dante yells, but it’s too late.

I don’t know how to feel. One moment Jax was there, racing through a corridor, about to escape. And then he was gone.

That’s the evil of this system. It’s insidious how easy it is to remove someone without their feeling a thing. Even watching it happen is unreal, as though Jax could pop back on the screen. But I know enough about

this world to know that's not going to happen. The proof that Jax is gone rests in Cormac's hands.

"There was a time when this strand would be sent off for alterations," Cormac says.

"To make Remnants," I say. "Giving up your war on Earth?"

"Oh, no. We've developed much more effective ways to rid ourselves of the vermin on Earth."

My words are strangled. "Which means?"

"I'm sure you saw them in the Eastern Sector."

The moths. The citizens of the Eastern Sector rotting before our eyes, their strands being eaten slowly. "You didn't need to sever the sector," I accuse. "You wanted to test your bugs."

"And they worked as beautifully as we imagined they would."

"But then …" My words are lost to my thoughts.

"We were watching you the whole time?" he asks. "Of course."

"You severed the sector though," Dante says.

"Exactly. I severed it. I didn't destroy it. The sector still exists."

Dante and I exchange a look and I know we're both feeling the same thing. How stupid could we have been? This means he knows everything we've planned. He knew about Loricel and Albert. He knew about …

"How much did you see?" I ask. My voice is strangled.

"I saw everything," he says with emphasis. "So much for purity standards, eh?"

My chest constricts knowing that my time with Erik was on display for Cormac. It makes me feel hot and sick and angry at the same time.

"You son of a—"

"Be a lady," he says.

"Oh, I am well past being a lady." I spit the words at him.

A blur knocks past me, causing the world around me to spin. Before I can determine what happened, Cormac crashes to the ground. My eyes flash to the empty chair next to me and I see that the rope has been torn in two. The whole time we've been here Dante was slowly altering the rope with his fingers. It hadn't even occurred to me to try because I'd been distracted by my conversation with Cormac. That explains why Dante had been silent most of the time.

The room splits and light bursts across the space as Cormac and Dante tear at each other.

I tug at my own bindings, feeling their composition and pulling them apart. There's no point in trying to do it quietly. Dante clearly claimed the element of surprise.

By the time I stand up it's hard to tell what to do. Dante and Cormac are rolling on the ground and by now each of them is bleeding from superficial tears. Neither has managed to get a strong enough grip to incapacitate the other. But I'm pretty sure trying to grab either of them will end poorly. Each second there's more blood, and I know that most of it is Dante's, because he has to work extra hard against Cormac's reinforced suit.

I head to the loom and trail my fingers along it, adjusting its scope to try to find this room on it. It's the only hope I have of helping Dante. If I can find the room, I can rip Cormac's thread. The loom shifts and pulls up one room after another, but I can't find this one.

I turn back to the pair grappling on the floor and consider lunging at Cormac just as Dante manages to pin him to the ground. I rush toward them, hoping I can help. Dante must not unwind Cormac—we need him to say the pass code before we can fully initiate Protocol Three. But Dante reaches for Cormac's chest anyway.

"Don't!" I cry. Dante's eyes flash to mine and it's only then that I realize what I've done.

I've distracted Dante.

It's only a split second, but that's all Cormac needs. I charge forward to stop him, but it's too late. Cormac's hand sinks into Dante's chest and I fall to the ground facing the golden strand clutched firmly in Cormac's hand.

"Please." It's the only thing I can say in this moment.

"Because you asked nicely," Cormac says, "I'll give you a second to close your eyes."

"You don't have to do this," I remind him. "You have a choice."

"Yes, I do." And with a wrench, he rends the time strand clean from Dante's body.

My eyes meet Dante's and he smiles. "Close your eyes, baby. I'm glad I met you."

I squeeze them shut and try to drown out the horrible scraping noise of unwinding time, the unnatural dissonance of stolen years leaving my father’s body too soon. We never had enough time.

“Open your eyes,” Cormac orders me. I shake my head, my eyelids pressed down to hold back tears I don’t want Cormac to see.

“I’ve seen you cry before,” he reminds me.

I open them and let the angry tears roll out. They are tears of accusation and hatred, but I’m not entirely sure they’re meant for Cormac.

I can’t escape knowing that this is my fault, but that’s not a new feeling and I’ve learned one thing.

It doesn’t matter.

Mistakes ebb and flow like the ocean and if you linger in them, the tide will wash you out to drown.

TWENTY-SIX

CORMAC IS COVERED IN DUST AND HE brushes it off as though it's nothing, dropping the time strand on the floor at his feet. I reach forward and pick it up, cradling it in my palm.

"Keep it," he says.

I drop the strand and swipe at Cormac, but he sidesteps me and I crash to the ground.

"I want you to think about what you're doing," he says.

"I know exactly what I'm doing," I say, scrambling to my feet and preparing to launch myself at him again.

"You need me," Cormac says, "and you couldn't defeat me if you tried. Are you willing to let innocent people die because you were impatient?"

I push my arms down to my sides and stare at him. My tears haven't abated, and I don't care.

"Are you going to give me the pass code?" I ask, already knowing the answer.

"Absolutely not."

"You know," I say in a low voice.

"Know what?" Cormac asks. I lean across his desk and press my hands hard against the smooth wood, waiting for my moment to strike as he pours a drink.

"That both worlds are in danger. What *I* don't know is how you think Arras will survive without Earth. Albert calculates—"

"Have you ever considered that those are the ravings of a decrepit man?"

"Look who's calling someone else decrepit," I mutter.

Cormac ignores me, but he sets down his glass with unusual force. "What would you do? Repopulate Earth? That is madness. Only one can survive—Earth or Arras. Which would you choose, Adelice? A world where everyone has what they need or a dying planet full of criminals and deviants?"

“The people of Arras don’t have everything they need,” I say.

“And what are they lacking?” His lips smack on the final word.

“Freedom.” I hold my gaze steady with his. He knows this and he can’t deny it’s something Arras doesn’t have and will never have under the control of the Guild.

“That’s a *want*, my dear,” Cormac says without missing a beat. “No one *needs* freedom.”

I guess we’ll have to disagree on that.

“We could kill each other,” Cormac says. “Right here and now and then what would come of Arras? Of Earth?”

“I’m not sure what happens if we both live through this,” I say softly. I don’t know if either of us deserves to walk out of here. And yet if we don’t, what becomes of everyone else? The singularity Albert predicted could be another form of control, misinformation spread by Cormac to distract us from his plans and lure me here. But did Albert believe it? Because I’m certain he wouldn’t lie to Loricel and me.

“It’s not too late. We can still join together,” he suggests.

“You just killed my father,” I remind him. “Our relationship is built on body bag after body bag, Cormac. I can’t think of anything worse than joining with you. Plus, you already admitted you’ve wanted to kill me this whole time.”

“There is that.” Nothing flickers in his cold black eyes. He’s not amused. He’s not calculating. His eyes are the color of the dark of night when the world lies in wait.

He’s plotting.

“Then neither of us walks out of here?”

As though he’s giving me a choice.

There are no choices with Cormac, only carefully laid traps. This is something I know too well.

“Arras won’t survive, but if we initiate Protocol Three then we can still save the people,” I argue with him. “As long as I’ve known you, you’ve always acted out of concern for the citizens, even if your methods were a bit warped for my taste.” I’m putting this mildly, hoping to lure him in with honey-promises and sweet words.

He laughs at me, clearly seeing through my act. “Don’t try to placate me, Adelice. I’ve spent my career twisting words to get what I want.

There will be no compromise on Protocol Three.”

I look to my useless digifile. There’s no one to call. Every channel leads to dead air.

“I see you’re still trying to set things right. You can stop,” Cormac says. “You’ve played your part remarkably well, Adelice.”

I don’t feel the ball of burning rage that usually builds in my chest when Cormac mocks me. No clever retorts float to mind. In their wake is something much more chilling: a dreadful emptiness that yawns inside me and makes me feel like giving up. How can you save the world from men like Cormac? There are too many to ever defeat them all.

Too many of them to even make it a possibility.

Cormac watches me with interest and a smile plays at his lips.

“What now?” I ask him.

“I find your reaction rather dull,” he says. “I expected a fight. I find it tasteless to unwind someone who’s sitting around doing nothing. If you aren’t a threat, then what’s the point?”

“If what you’re telling me is true, then I’ve *never* been a threat to you.”

“Touché, and yet …” Cormac pauses, tilting his head slightly. The companels in the room prompt us once more for the pass code but now the evacuation sirens feels like background noise. I hear the prompt, but it doesn’t matter. “Hannox, initiate the troops in the Eastern Sector.”

My eyes fly up to Cormac’s and now there’s a glimmer of amusement in them. He’s made his puppet dance.

“Would you like to watch?” he asks.

“Is this necessary?” I ask him, reaching for any argument that might stop him. “The bugs will spread to Earth more quickly if you let the citizens go to the surface.”

“Who sounds desperate now?” He barks a security clearance code at the screen and it begins to stream the Eastern Sector. There’s a crowd of people gathered outside the Ministry offices. The camera’s stream sits far off the ground but I spot Jost and Erik directing the group.

“Stop this. I’m asking you to stop.”

“I can’t!” He knocks his glass from his desk, sending its contents flying across the room. “As long as the poison is in the system, it continues to spread.”

I set my chin defiantly and stare at him. “Then you’ll have to kill me, too.”

“It will be my pleasure,” he says.

Cormac hasn’t noticed the small changes I’ve made to my posture. He hasn’t noticed that I’m not sitting but rather squatting over my chair and that my arms are locked and ready, so when I fly across the room, my feet pounding out the few steps that lie between Cormac and me, he doesn’t have time to react.

I bound up the desk before he can move away and with one perfect, precise swipe, I’m holding his time strand in my left hand. It’s golden and new, much too young for someone as old as Cormac. I knit it through my fingers, raising it up to my face so that Cormac and I are both staring at it hovering there between us. My fingers are red with blood, and it oozes onto Cormac’s lifeline.

“Always lead with your left,” I whisper. “All Crewelers know that.”

“I guess this means that you win,” Cormac says. His voice is breathless. Expectant.

“I never thought of this as a game,” I say as I twist the delicate strand. I only have to pull it, but is it too late?

“Are you waiting for something?” he asks.

“You’ve always struggled under the illusion that one simply does or doesn’t do something,” I say, “but that’s taught me to think about my actions.”

“I suppose you expect me to beg for mercy.”

“I would never expect that.” And in truth I don’t. Cormac is too proud to beg, but there’s something else in his eyes now. It could be mistaken for dread, but it looks more like finality.

“The world tells us there is a black and a white. We’re told people fall into those two categories, Adelice. Good and evil. Light and dark. But that’s the real lie they sell us. Everyone exists in the gray. We’re only capable of living within that shaded perception of truth,” he says.

“So what you’ve done wasn’t wrong?” I ask, thinking of my mother and my father. Of Dante. Of Erik and Jost, who are probably dying right now at his hands.

“It’s wrong to you, but can’t you see the gray?” he asks. “If you were me, could you turn away? From the power? From the possibility?”

“And leave innocent people alone?” I ask. “Yes.”

“And yet plenty of innocent people have died at your hands,” he says.

I stare at the time strand wrapped around my fingers and wonder how his perception has become as warped as the strand itself. It’s no longer simply about the greater good. Cormac has made himself into a hero. He’s given himself the power of the creator, after bestowing that “gift” upon others before him. He doesn’t see himself as having committed any wrong, because he did what he thought was right.

And here I am, holding his life in my hands and knowing exactly what it means to persist in a gray area. Cormac Patton deserves to die. Of that much I’m certain, but do I deserve to kill him? Does anyone have the right to kill someone else?

There is enough blood on my hands for a lifetime.

I could unwind Cormac and wait. Wait for the singularity. Wait for the Guild officials to find me. Wait to die one way or another. It hardly matters anymore.

Because no one wins in this scenario.

“Don’t tell me you’ve had a sudden fit of mercifulness?”

“I’m thinking.” I press the time strand tightly between my fingers and Cormac gasps.

“What is the pass code?” I ask him.

“I will never tell you that.”

“You’re going to die, Cormac,” I say. It has already begun. His hair is slowly turning white and lines are appearing in his polished face. He won’t be the handsome face of the Guild much longer. “And without us, there will be no Arras,” I say softly. “So why not tell me the pass code?”

“Because I’ve lived over two hundred years and I will die alone,” he says. “I will cease and no one will mourn me.”

“You won’t be alone.” I realize then that fear is the barrier between us now, and only I can remove it. But I won’t say I will mourn Cormac. I won’t lie to him.

“You will die, too.” Cormac’s words aren’t a threat. They linger somewhere between a thought and a question. As though he needs me to know this, needs me to acknowledge this.

“Everything has a beginning and an end,” I say to him. I pull gently on his time thread, careful not to remove it entirely. I can feel the end of

it barely holding on, still running through him. I could pull it completely out, unwind him, but instead, with a gentle twist, I snap the thread at his chest. Maybe he has seconds left. Maybe he has days.

“Why not unwind me entirely?” he asks.

“I want you to face your own end.” By removing most of his time strand, I’ve taken back the life he’s stolen from others. I could have unwound him entirely and watched as he crumbled to dust, but I want him to stare his death in the face, knowing he can’t stop it.

But now that I’ve released my hold on him, he pushes me against the wall, his arm crushing my windpipe. I struggle to breathe, black spots blotting my vision, but I don’t fight against him. And then he drops his hold on me and stumbles back, laughing. I gasp as my throat reopens and air rushes into my lungs.

“It doesn’t matter. I will make certain you fade with me. Neither of us will be the hero of this story,” Cormac says, falling onto his back and clutching his chest. “Authorization: Alpha One Destruct Three. Arras will be destroyed and you along with it.”

Cormac isn’t going to let me walk out of here, and I don’t blame him.

“Now we’re even,” he says between heaving breaths. “We’ll both die here. Neither of us wins.”

His breathing becomes more labored and I know he’s close to the end. The color drains from his face. This is it. The man who took everything from me is finally going to die. It hardly matters that he’s found a way to kill me now.

“The evacuation already started. The people are safe. It doesn’t matter if I die,” I say without flinching.

“You’re prepared for this? To lose the looms? To lose the control?” he asks. “You could have lived forever.”

“I’d rather die than continue with this lie.”

“It takes a talented girl to do that,” he says.

I regard him for a long moment before I answer. “I know.”

His body seizes as the light fades from his dark eyes, and then he’s gone. Standing, I walk to the window and stare out. There’s no point trying to run now. There’s nowhere to go. Whatever security forces are left here won’t let me go, although I doubt anyone’s sticking around.

The door bursts open and Hannox barrels in, nose still bloody, stopping to stare at Cormac's lifeless, withered body. I close my eyes and wait, both for retribution and for peace.

But nothing happens. When I open them, Hannox's gaze has shifted to me.

"He's dead then?"

I can't read his face. It is entirely absent of thought or feeling, nearly slack with apathy. "Yes."

Hannox looks up to the ceiling and then lowers his head to nod once. "I've waited a long time for this day."

"You were his best friend," I say, hoping to prompt a reaction, because fear is starting to filter through my blood. I'm not sure I can fade away with the world. I'd rather die fighting.

"Duty and friendship are not the same thing," he says.

Outside, the sky is a shimmering web of color, loosening and blurring in a spectacular display of light. Closing my eyes, I listen to the discord of space and time colliding and crossing as the pattern of this world collapses on itself. I wonder what it will feel like to fade into the universe. I can almost imagine the numbness of nonexistence creeping through my limbs like a slow-moving drug, and yet I feel oddly at peace.

There's a crackle of sound in the room and I whip around to find myself standing face-to-face with Alix.

"How?" I ask, staring at her.

"No time for that," she says, tossing me a backpack.

I look at Hannox, and Alix freezes, drawing a gun from her hip, and in the same moment that I scream, "No," I hear one word escape from his lips.

"Please."

The shot is off before either word registers, and Hannox falls back against the wall. His eyes find mine and he smiles. It's then that I realize he wasn't asking for mercy, he was asking to be freed.

Alix shifts back on her heels. "I didn't know that he was an ally."

"I don't think he did either."

Alix shakes her head as if to dissolve her guilt. "We can't worry about it now. Put that on."

I examine the pack, unsure what to do with it until Alix groans and grabs it, holding out the straps. She slides them over my shoulders and pulls a strap around my waist. I buckle it into place and wait for her to give me any indication of what's going on.

"How did you get here?" I ask her when nothing happens.

"How do you think?" she snaps, pivoting around the room as though she's looking for an escape route.

"But Cormac destroyed the Eastern Sector," I say.

"Most of it, but Loricel is talented and she wasn't going down without a fight." Alix spots Cormac's body and whistles. "I wish I could tell her about that."

"It doesn't matter," I say confidently. I'm enough like Loricel to know that the victory would be as hollow for her as it is for me. I wonder what we're waiting for, what impossible feat Loricel is going to pull off now.

And as I wonder a fissure of light splits the room, in the middle, like a seam ripping open. But there's no Interface beneath us anymore. It's already dissipated as Protocol Three unwinds Arras from existence. This is her plan? This isn't like my escape from Arras. Then the Coventry was in the Interface, closer to the ground. We can't survive jumping from here to Earth.

But Alix doesn't waste time considering this as she grabs me and throws us through a gash in the weave.

We're falling too fast for me to get a handle on Earth's strands. Alix points to her vest and tugs at a cord near the zipper. A balloon of fabric billows behind her. She jerks as it opens fully, but then her fall starts to slow. My own speed accelerates so quickly that she grows small in my vision. I search frantically for my cord, but my fingers find nothing, which is a problem since the ground is getting closer and closer. Finally, my hands close on the cord, and I yank it as hard as I can. The force of the chute jolts me, knocking the wind from my lungs, and I gasp for air I cannot catch. As my descent slows, I'm able to calm down enough to breathe deeply and by the time I hit the ground, I crumple into a ball, trying to ease the last waves of panic.

"You okay?" Alix calls, running over to me.

Note to self: it only took a near-death experience for her to show some concern for me.

I try to say yes, but I’m too overwhelmed. She pulls me up from the ground, but her grip isn’t gentle and she drops my hand as soon as I’m steady on my feet.

“Loricel said this is your chance,” Alix says. “She said it’s the one she should have given you before.”

I look up at the pattern moving swiftly across the sky. It’s already growing fainter, like a strange cloud disappearing into rain.

Thank you, I think.

Alix turns on her heel and starts to head away.

“Wait!” I cry. “Where are you going?”

“There are millions of survivors,” Alix says, facing me. “They’ll need me.”

Need her. Not me. Nothing has changed between Alix and me, even after everything else that’s changed around us.

“The others?” I ask. “Did they make it out?”

“Nearly everyone left with the first wave. The little girl is safe,” she says, but she stops short of telling me what I want to know and a knot tangles in my stomach.

“What about the boys?”

“They stayed to help everyone evacuate.” She pauses for a moment and something flashes across her face. Like everything about Alix, it’s completely unreadable. “That’s all I know, but I wouldn’t count on them getting out.”

“Why?” I ask. “You did. They could have, too.”

Alix hesitates before she answers. “They … they stayed to make sure Loricel could rebound me in to you. They held off the security forces Cormac sent in.”

She takes a long breath before adding weakly, “I’m sorry.” I don’t believe a word she says, or maybe I can’t believe it, because it means I’m the one who has to tell our story and I must do it alone. I will live a half-life, caught in a past I can never forget.

I don’t ask Alix to wait for me. Instead I turn my eyes to the sky as numbness washes through me. It’s exactly how I imagined I would feel as Arras faded from reality. Although I’m here and alive, I feel as frozen and dead as I expected.

Arras has become a web of color written across the sky in lines of lace and luminescence. The sun breaks through the growing holes and for the first time in decades its heat touches the Earth. It’s hot on my face and I think of emerald leaves and possibilities lost. There will be no schoolgirl to tug my hand earnestly toward home. There will be no boy to take me in his arms for a moonlight dance. It’s the end of my world and the beginning of my life.

I’ve never felt more alone.

TWENTY-SEVEN

THE CAMP IS A MASS OF FAMILIES CLUTCHING together and speaking in low voices. They sit on coats and bags. No one was prepared for this and as the new sun wanes over Earth—the day far too short for a history of darkness—the group I've stumbled on barely notices me as I shamble into their presence. A few cast suspicious eyes in my direction, but otherwise I feel invisible. And for the first time in a long time, I am no one. I can't fix this world at the touch of a loom.

I am free. I am possibility.

Something crushes my heart as I take in the survivors. It grips me with thin, cold fingers and I can't shake them loose.

"Do they have that radio system up and running yet?" a man shouts to another.

"Not yet, and who knows if anyone else will have one."

"We still need to work on it," he says as he stops to converse with a family. He's tall and strong and he looks like my father. This is what Benn would be doing right now. Making plans, helping others.

It's what I have to do. Be helpful. Be strong. I must move forward.

"Are you okay?" someone behind me asks and I turn toward the voice, but I sway with the movement and collapse into her.

"Does anyone have any water?" she yells. There's a clamor of activity around me and a few moments later a cup presses against my lips. I hadn't realized I was thirsty, but I drink it and I let them lay me back against a bed of jackets.

"Do you know where you came from?" the woman asks me as a half dozen concerned faces peer over me.

I look at each one and try to decide what to tell them. In the end I settle on the simplest story. "I was in Cypress."

"What's your family's name, honey?" she asks. "We'll pass the word around. They must be worried sick about you."

"Lewys," I say. "But I was alone."

No one recognizes the name—or me—without Cormac at my side. Without the beautiful clothes and pinned-up hair, without the cameras, I'm only another girl. I'm only another survivor. No one asks why a girl of my age was alone or what happened to my family, but I can't be the only orphan here tonight.

They are remarkably calm, but as the woman strokes my forehead, someone asks in a low voice, "Have they figured out what happened yet?"

No one speaks, but finally a man shakes his head. "There are theories, of course," he whispers, but as he begins to share them I slip into the darkness pressing heavily on my eyes.

I have no need of theories.

*

I wake to an old lullaby and for a moment my mother's face swims into my vision, but when I blink she is young and fair-haired.

"Amie!" I gasp.

"You're awake," she says, relief flooding her voice. She waves to someone and Pryana hurries over and helps Amie sit me up.

"You won. You got out," I say in a weak voice.

Pryana shrugs, even though she grins a little. "Did you have any doubt?"

"Thank you." The words feel too simple slipping from my lips, but they weigh heavy in the air between us. It's all I can offer to a girl who owes me nothing and to whom I owe everything.

"I'll leave you two alone." Before she goes, Pryana bends down and wraps her arms around me, squeezing me in a tight, awkward hug.

I swallow and nod once, afraid I will cry. I can never repay my debt to her.

"How did you find me?" I ask Amie after she's left.

"Pryana got me out," she says. "She suspected you would go to Cypress. To find Cormac."

Amie waits for me to confirm this, but I only nod. I'm not ready to talk about it yet.

"Is he dead?" she asks me in a flat voice.

“Yes.”

Amie’s face contorts and I recognize the pain of confusion.

“Did you kill him?”

I can’t lie to her. Not anymore. Lying has never protected her. “Yes.”

She presses her lips into a thin line and neither of us speaks. My reasons for killing Cormac won’t absolve me of what I’ve done and her forgiveness won’t either. But she doesn’t leave my side. We sit in silence like two strangers who have nothing to talk about.

TWENTY-EIGHT

THE REFUGEE CAMPS ARE FULL OF THE broken and the bruised, the angry and the grateful. Each camp is a press of bodies—living, working, and healing together. Although there are no elected leaders, the strong step forward to direct and guide until there is a working system. I stop at each camp, checking the wounded; the bodies have been buried by volunteers. The bodies that made it to Earth before Arras faded into space. The evacuation was dangerous, but the days after were worse. Peace is still a fragile reality here.

But in the camps along the eastern coast of America, they tell me stories of the ones who came to save them. They tell of the brothers with the same eyes, who fought the Guild forces when they came.

No one has seen them.

Amie travels with me, choosing to leave Pryana behind at the first camp, and I'm grateful for her company. Without transport, we walk, and the days become weeks until our new reality no longer feels new. We've been on the surface a little over a month, and Amie hasn't questioned why I won't stop looking.

I think she wants answers that I cannot give her—about what happened in Arras. But those memories are too tangled with grief for me to separate them into words, so we are mostly quiet as we travel. I am bound to a promise and haunted by hope. Alix said Sebrina made it to the surface, and I have to find her for Jost. But I'm on the east coast, about to give up, when news of an outlying camp on the northern end of the seaboard reaches us. We speak to one of the self-appointed leaders, hoping he can point us in the right direction.

"That outpost is a two-day walk," he explains to us.

"Amie"—I turn to my sister—"you should stay here while I go to check it out."

"No, I'll come with you." Despite leaving a life of luxury, Amie hasn't complained once about the conditions on Earth. Our weeks here have been full of harsh travel as we walked in search near the coasts. I've

spent so much time thinking of Amie as a liability—as a victim—that I never saw how strong she has become in the absence of our parents. We've both grown up too early.

One of the men from the camp comes over to us and whispers in the leader's ear. Their conversation is low and strained, but when it ends, he turns to us. "I can offer you two motocycles."

"We can't borrow them," I say. "We're heading west by week's end. I can't return them."

"It's a gift."

He doesn't look like he's in a very giving mood—this is clearly the other man's idea—and I shake my head once more, even as Amie squeezes my arm. She wants me to accept. I want to, too, but I also know how valuable a motocycle would be out here.

"It's a generous offer," I say, "but I can't take them from you. You need them."

"Miss Lewys, I don't know how you did what you did," the other man says. "And I know there are a lot of rumors flying around about what happened in Arras between you and Patton. Not everyone here likes you."

So I've been recognized. I knew it would happen as the survivors' shock dulled. I'd been on every screen in Arras only weeks before its destruction.

"Tell me something I don't know."

"I'm not one of those people, and I want to say thank you," the man says. He keeps his gaze level with mine; his eyes don't blink, as though he's challenging me to decline his offer again.

"Thank you." I don't say anything else. I know what it's like to feel like you have nothing to offer someone in need. I know how hard it is to even say thank you.

The motocyles are slick, large beasts, recovered from Guild warehouses near the abandoned mine sites. Chrome tubes twist along their bodies and even parked they look nearly as large as motocarriages. The man gives Amie and me a tutorial on how to ride them. I don't tell him that I've ridden one before or that I'm terrified of it now. Both because I don't want to look ungrateful and to set a good example for my sister. More than anything she needs to see that I'm strong and capable in

this world. The engine hums to life between my legs, the vibration traveling up through my fingers and dying on their damaged tips, and I grip the handles tightly and kick off from the dirt. We roar forward to our last hope.

With the motocyle the journey to the outpost takes only a few hours. We have a compass to guide us, but it doesn't take us long to see signs of life. Now that the population of Earth has grown exponentially, travel between the new outposts is more common. And with the number of refugees and wounded on Earth, more and more people are reaching out to the fledgling communities that surround them. We pass two young men walking down the road toward the camp we came from. They wave hello and I slow to speak to them.

"We heard there's a camp full of the wounded ahead."

"We have a few, miss. They were at the battle of Allia."

My heart beats hard, and I'm sure it can be heard over the roar of the engine. The Eastern capital. That was where Cormac unleashed his forces. I know Erik and Jost were there.

"Can we give you a ride?" Amie asks.

"No, miss." The boy smiles widely at her, and I realize, with more than a little apprehension, that he thinks she's pretty.

It's still hard to fathom that my baby sister is nearly as old as I am now. Or that she's grown into a young woman. It had been only months for me that we were separated, but it's been years for her. She grew up while I wasn't looking.

"We should go, Amie."

She shoots me an annoyed, if amused, look. Maybe I do know how to protect her.

The camp isn't far ahead and we park the bikes outside the tents.

"You know, there aren't purity standards here," Amie tells me, poking me in the arm. "I can talk to boys."

"It's not the *talking* to boys I'm worried about," I say dryly.

"I'm not the one stalking across half the world looking for a boy." Amie claps a hand over her mouth. I know she wishes she could take it back, but I roll my eyes, unwilling to betray the stab of pain in my chest. Her accusation hurts because it's true.

We don’t talk about Erik. She hasn’t asked me about him since we’ve been on Earth, but love is one emotion that leaves its marks on you. Even my kid sister can see them.

“That’s why I’m worried about you,” I say. “Trust me, this isn’t something I want for you.”

Amie stops me and studies my face for a moment. “You love him?”

No matter how I frame these trips as being about finding Sebrina, I hope to find him, too. And she can see that, so I nod.

“Why wouldn’t you want that for me?” she asks. “We were lucky to grow up with parents who loved each other, Ad. It’s okay to be in love.”

I can only give her a tiny smile. I don’t tell her that this is killing me. Not knowing. Pretending to be strong when I need to crumble. That this is what love is: vulnerability.

“About purity standards,” Amie says, changing the subject.

“Yes?”

“Any chance you still meet them?”

“You saw Erik,” I say, grinning despite myself. “What do you think?”

“Forget I asked.”

Zigzagging through the tents, we stop to speak to survivors, looking for directions and tips like we’ve done in every camp thus far. At the base of one tent, a woman eyes us warily as we approach.

“Hello,” I say, trying to sound friendly. “We’re looking for some survivors from Allia. We think they might be here. Two—”

“Don’t know anything about two brothers,” she says.

I look at Amie. I hadn’t said anything about brothers. I push down my mounting suspicion, but I can’t bring myself to say anything. Or I’ll want to accuse the woman of lying.

“Are you sure?” Amie asks. Her tone is naturally kinder than mine.

“Nope.”

“Thanks anyway,” I say, grabbing Amie’s arm and dragging her off. I know the woman is watching us.

“What was that about?” Amie ponders out loud.

“They have to be here,” I say through gritted teeth. My eyes dart between the tents and before I can stop myself I start lifting the flaps and looking inside them. More than a few people yell at me, but I wave an apologetic hand and continue looking.

“Why would she lie to us?”

“I don’t know.”

When I lift the next flap, I’m staring at Alix.

She’s chopped her long blond hair into a bob and she’s dressed in jeans and an old flannel shirt. No one would think this woman is a threat, but I don’t know what to think of her at all. I know she’s capable of force, and of deception. That’s why I’m not surprised to see her here. I’ve thought Alix was hiding something since she showed up in Cormac’s offices. Why else would she take off as soon as we reached the surface?

“Adelice,” she says, but the shock in her voice is manufactured. She knew I would come.

“What are you hiding?” I demand, ducking into her tent.

“It’s nice to see you, too.” She stands to greet me, but I don’t take her extended hand. She turns and offers it to Amie, who accepts it with an uncomfortable glance in my direction.

“Is he here?” I ask her. I know she had a history with Erik, but would she keep me from him after what’s happened?

Alix turns away from me and rakes a hand through her loose hair. When she speaks, her voice is low and distant. “Erik is dead.”

I die in that moment. Amie’s arm wraps around my waist, but I push her away. I squeeze my eyes shut and try to erase the words from my head.

“You’re lying,” I accuse.

Alix rounds on me and there are tears in her eyes. “I wish I was lying.”

And then I know it’s true, because I can see her heart is broken. I hear it in her voice. I see it in the absence behind her eyes. I feel it in the hollow of my stomach.

“What happened?” Amie asks because I can’t.

“I’m not sure. I wasn’t there,” she says, reaching down to retrieve a bag from the ground. “Come on.”

We follow her out of the tent. Each step is automatic. I follow her because I should. I don’t care where we’re going.

“How can you know he’s dead?” Amie asks her. “If you weren’t there.”

A spark of hope flares in my chest. Why hadn’t I thought to ask that?

“I saw his body.”

The tiny flicker dies.

“Where is it?” I ask.

“I buried it.”

I don’t ask her where. It doesn’t matter. Erik isn’t there anymore. I try to remember what Loricel told me about people who die naturally. A piece of them fades back into the universe. Had I watched him fade away with Arras as I stood on the surface of Earth? No, Alix said she buried him, so he must have made it here.

“Wait,” I say, grabbing Alix’s wrist and twisting it. “You told me you didn’t know where he was. The night of Protocol Three.”

“I didn’t know where he was then.”

“But when you found out, you didn’t send for me?” I accuse.

“This isn’t Arras,” Alix reminds me. “I can’t shoot you a telebound. He’s dead, Adelice. I can’t change that.”

She can’t change it, and it’s not her fault. But I need to be angry with someone, because the pain is building like an inferno desperate for oxygen. I want it to consume me and destroy me.

“Where are we going?” Amie asks, trying to change the subject.

Alix stops in front of a large canopy made of a variety of canvases patched together. She gestures for us to enter. Inside lie rows of makeshift cots full of the wounded and the recovering, and Alix marches down one. A few volunteers stop her to ask questions. Obviously Alix has stepped up to a leadership position in this camp.

“You were Agenda the whole time,” I say finally.

“No, I was turned,” she says.

“By whom?” I ask.

“I think you know the answer to that.”

I want her to say it. Was it Erik who convinced her to betray Cormac? *How* had he convinced her? What promises passed between them? There were more layers to discover about him. Now I can only uncover those secrets through her.

“Adelice.” Alix turns and stares at me. “I understand you have questions, but there’s only one thing you need to know. Erik loved you.”

“I know that.” It’s the only thing that feels real.

“Nothing else matters, then.”

In the void left by his death this seems impossible to comprehend. Of course other things mattered. Because without answers there was only the aching absence of him. If answers could fill the void, I would keep searching for them.

But even as I thought it, I knew that they never would.

“Nothing I can say will bring him back to you, and there are other things to consider.”

“Like what?” I bark. Alix has had weeks to deal with this loss. But it’s a naked wound for me and I don’t need her to lecture me on how to handle it. Maybe she can forget, but I can’t. I’ve been asked to forget too many people already.

“Like him.” Alix points to the cot she’s stopped beside. I turn angrily to the bed and the sight sucks the breath from me.

He’s badly injured, a thick wind of gauze around his head, dried blood coating the outside. I drop to Jost’s side and push the hair from his face, revealing the telltale marks of battle already scarring along his jaw. He’s healing quickly, but the damage is extensive.

“Jost?” My voice is barely a whisper over the pounding of my heart.

“You didn’t lose everyone,” Alix reminds me.

I am not alone to tell the story. This thought crowds into the empty space inside me, threatening to spill over into joy.

“Will he live?” I ask Alix, and as if to answer my question, Jost’s hand jerks forward and grabs mine.

“Jost?” This time I’m calling to him, asking him to hear me.

There’s a flutter of lashes and he opens his mouth, but no words come out, only a groan.

“He’s in bad shape,” Alix says, “but he’s a fighter and he has a good reason to live.”

“Sebrina,” I guess.

“She’s here. You missed her by about five minutes.”

“She’s staying with you?”

“I’m looking after her,” she says, “until Jost gets better.”

“I promised to take care of her. We’ve been looking for her for weeks. You disappeared before you told me where she was,” I say.

“She’s safe here,” Alix says, but I shake my head.

Even if Jost recovers, this is my promise to him.

“Ad.” The nickname is spoken so impossibly quietly that I think I must have imagined I heard it slip from his lips.

“I’m here.” I lean down to Jost, placing my other hand over the one clutching mine.

“You have to take care of Sebrina,” he says.

“I told you I would,” I remind him softly.

“I don’t think I can do it,” he says. His hand begins to tremble in mine and a seizure rolls through his body. A medic rushes over and gives him a shot.

“I’m sorry, but he’ll go back to sleep now,” he explains.

“It’s okay. I’ll be here awhile.”

“He’ll sleep for a long time,” he warns me.

“Will he get better?”

“His injuries are severe, and some of the work is extensive.”

“Work?” I ask.

“It looks like a Tailor tried to heal some of his wounds,” Alix says, stepping in.

“A Tailor?” I ask in horror.

“We’re not all bad,” the medic says with a wink, and I realize with some embarrassment that of course this man would be a Tailor. “Your friend will be fine.”

“Thank you,” I tell him.

“We should let him sleep,” Alix says, placing a hand on my shoulder.

I pull away from her.

“I need a few minutes alone with him, okay.”

The medic and Alix exchange a look, but they do as I ask.

“I’ll be with Alix,” Amie says. She leans down and kisses me on the forehead.

Once they’re gone I turn my attention back to Jost. Some of the scars are barely visible while others streak angrily across his shoulders. I pull the sheet down to examine his chest. The marks extend there. Whatever happened to him, it was serious. Despite the medic’s reassurances that he will live, dread steals through me. How had he survived this? How exactly was he altered?

“Sebrina.” Her name barely escapes his dry lips.

“She’s fine,” I say to him. “Alix is watching her.”

“Promise me like you promised him,” Jost mumbles.

I’m not sure what he’s trying to tell me. The drugs they’ve given him must be making him delirious.

“Promise you’ll care for her,” he repeats.

“I promise, Jost.” The weight of the vow is heavy on my chest, but he seems to relax, his hand loosening over my own.

“But you have to fight, Jost,” I say. “For her. For me.”

“Never stop …” His words are a maze of sounds, losing me in his drugged haze. “You.”

“Rest,” I command, placing a gentle kiss on his bruised cheek. He goes to sleep then, and I stand to leave him, wondering what he meant by “never stop you.”

But the thought that haunts me can’t be possible.

TWENTY-NINE

NIGHT FALLS, STEALING AWAY EARTH'S SUN UNTIL another day dawns. It always feels like the darkness settles too soon over this healing planet, but I'm grateful that the camp grows quiet. People return to their makeshift homes and tents. Amie falls asleep in the one loaned to us by someone with a kinder heart than mine, and I sneak out to the edge of the camp where the world is still and the air hangs like a heavy black blanket. This is where I can see the stars.

Alix appears, moving so softly through the darkness that I'm unaware of her until she's nearly by my side. She thrusts a tattered bag into my hands.

"What is this?" I ask her, tired of her lies and secrets.

"Open it."

"I don't want it." There is nothing she can give me anymore. Not answers or guidance, and certainly not hope.

"You aren't the only one with a broken heart," she says in a soft voice.

I don't look at her. It doesn't take much to know when someone is in love, especially when that person is in love with the same man as you. It doesn't soften my feelings toward her, though.

"Is that why you won't tell me how he died?" I ask her. "Because you can't share his last moments?"

Alix takes a step toward me, and when she speaks her voice is low. "Do you think that he would want you to share that? He died for Jost, so that he could live."

Her eyes are heavy as she confesses this, full of a burden that I don't quite understand.

"Then why not tell me where Jost was? Why keep it hidden?"

"I'm sorry that I was presumptuous about Jost and his wishes," she says, skirting my question.

I stop her. "You weren't presumptuous. You were purposeful. Deliberate. You knew what he wanted. You knew I was alive. I know that. The only thing I don't know is why you kept the truth from me."

Alix opens her mouth but then shuts it again, turning back toward the camp.

“Take this,” I call to her, holding out the bag.

“I have no claim to that,” Alix says. “I’ll be gone by morning. Take care of Sebrina. Jost will be strong soon.”

I should argue with her, try to stop her, but instead I let her fade into the night while I consider her words. She felt she had a claim on Jost. That’s why she kept him from me, but I’m not sure why. Except that he’s the last piece of Erik left. I consider the growing ache that only exacerbates the hollowness inside of me instead of filling it. That’s why she kept Jost from me and why she won’t tell me about Erik’s final moments.

Moments that are as much mine as they are hers. So what can she possibly give me now? What doesn’t she have a claim on? I tip the bag upside down and let its contents fall to the earth. It nestles there catching moonlight and reflecting it like a beacon, unwanted but undeniable in its potential.

A small crystal box.

THIRTY

BUILDINGS ARE BORN FROM SCRAPS AND FOUND materials. Babies are born to mothers. Earth blooms into a world of promise instead of mere potential as each of us rebuilds from what's been left behind. I expected to find myself more alone than ever before. But there are people who fill my time with emergencies and concerns and even laughter.

I find a hodgepodge of rooms that I build into a home and I open it to my strange, collected family.

Sometimes in the crowded streets of our fledgling metro I think I spot my mother watching me. Other times whispers follow me. I don't go out for weeks at a time after those days, but I've started telling my story to Amie. She listens in our cramped living room, without questions. But every now and then she gasps at a revelation, and I'm taken back to our bedroom in Romen. To two sisters whispering gossip in the dark. I leave nothing out, because she deserves to know everything.

A day will arrive when others come for this story and I am determined to remember it.

I will face that moment to protect my family—Sebrina, Jost, and Amie.

And when I'm finally ready to believe again, I will pull a relic of a former life from the high shelf in my closet. A small crystal box—a gift from Pryana, the girl who gave me everything that I took from her, and salvaged by Alix, the girl with a broken heart—that holds the very humanity of my mother.

Maybe one day I'll seek the answers I haven't found—from the woman who spies on me from the outskirts of life. I'm certain she has those answers, just as I am sure that she watches Amie and me when she thinks we're not looking. But I'm not quite ready to hear that story from my mother.

But I share other stories—less dangerous ones. I read stories of heroes who don't wear faces I know. Stories captured by people long since dead. I slide into books and lose myself in pages.

“Read more,” Sebrina begs as I shut the worn book. She could listen to stories all night.

“You have to sleep sometime, little night owl.”

Sebrina makes a hooting noise and I grin at her, brushing her hair back and giving her a soft kiss on the forehead. We’re settling into this quiet life at a rate I wouldn’t have thought possible. It has its difficulties, but given the choice between tilling soil to plant food or facing the Guild, I’ll gladly choose this life.

“Ad, when will Jost be better?” she asks me, and my heart skips a beat. She still doesn’t call him *Dad*. I wish she would.

“I’m already stronger,” Jost calls from the doorway, leaning against its frame.

“You two will have your own home soon,” I tell her, “because your dad is healthier every day.”

Sebrina screws up her face. “I like living with you. Don’t you like living with Adelice?” she asks him.

There’s a pained pause.

“Yes, I love it, but she might want her own space,” he says.

“Do you want us to leave?” Sebrina’s eyes are wide and bright. I think they look more like Erik’s eyes than Jost’s, and I shake my head.

“I want you to stay as long as you like.”

I pull the covers up to her chin and tuck them tightly around her like a cocoon. Then I sing my mother’s lullaby, aware that Jost is still here. I close the door softly behind me when Sebrina’s breathing slows into a rhythmic snore.

“I’m sorry about that,” Jost says when I step into the living room.

“There’s nothing to be sorry about,” I tell him, moving past him to sit down.

“She’s getting attached to you.”

“And you don’t like that?” I ask him.

“No, I do.” He dares a glance at me. There is a mournful sadness in his eyes. “I don’t want you to feel trapped, Adelice. You aren’t the one who’s responsible for her.”

“A lot has changed, Jost,” I say.

But we don’t talk about the gulf between us or the loss we’ve endured. There can be no moving forward for Jost and me. The past has

left a wound in both of us that can never heal. We both know that.

And yet, things have changed. Jost has changed. He's quick with his smile and silly with his jokes. But the fire has gone out of his eyes. He's no longer consumed by guilt and duty. Now a calm wisdom reflects from them. Perhaps he's more like Erik than I realized. Maybe he needed Sebrina around to show me. But there's something else. Something I don't let myself think about even though it niggles into my dreams and lodges in my unconscious mind, playing tricks on me during the waking hours when I catch Jost looking at me.

"What are you thinking about?" he asks. He stretches out his hand and runs a finger along the outline of my techprint. The scarred skin tingles and something pushes against my mind—a thought I refuse to acknowledge even as it trembles through me.

I draw my hand away. "Ghosts."

Our eyes meet and a chill creeps up my neck.

"No ghosts," he says, extending his hand again. "Dance with me?"

"There's no music."

"I know," he says.

I take his hand, curiosity getting the better of me and something shivers through me at his touch. A familiarity. An instinct. I stare into his calm blue eyes and swallow the question that wanders onto my lips as he leads me into a sweeping waltz. He meets my gaze and I know him.

Love is not love which alters when it alteration finds.

THE END

About the Author

Photograph by Tessa Elwood

GENNIFER ALBIN is the author of *Crewel* and *Altered*. She holds a master's degree in English literature from the University of Missouri and founded the tremendously popular blog theconnectedmom. com. She lives in Poulsbo, Washington, with her husband and two children. Learn more about her at genniferalbin.com.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS BOOK 1

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